



BOWERY BOY

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No. 4

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 11, 1905.

Price, Five Cents

BOWERY BILLY ON DECK

OR THE TRAIL OF THE GOTHAM FIREBUGS

JOHN R. CONWAY
PRIVATE DETECTIVE



"Say good-bye, Bowery William," laughed Skyrowski, the firebug, "for you're going up in smoke. There's such a thing sometimes as a boy knowing too much."

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: American lads have always eagerly read stories of life among the street Arabs of our great cities. There appears to be some peculiar charm connected with these scenes among the lowly, even to boys who have never visited New York. To them the Bowery stands for all that is adventurous and mysterious, while its jostling crowds are the various actors in an exciting drama of real life. Believing that an up-to-date weekly would be gladly welcomed, if devoted *exclusively* to stories founded upon the exciting adventures experienced by wide-awake street boys, we have launched the Bowery Boy Library. It speaks for itself.



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BOWERY BILLY ON DECK;

OR,

The Trail of the Gotham Firebugs.

By JOHN R. CONWAY, Private Detective.

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

Bowery Billy, an adventurous little street Arab, whose career in the midst of the whirlpools and slums of a great city brought him in daily contact with such a variety of mysteries and puzzles waiting to be solved, that he just naturally fell into the way of acting the part of a young sleuth, and took the keenest delight in mixing up with trouble, such as can always be found in the neighborhood of the once famous Bowery—a lad keen and shrewd as they make them, bold of heart, and ready at all times to take chances for a friend.

Dan, the bully of the Bowery, a friend of Billy's, who knew something about the bootblack's wonderful left arm, and had respect for the same.

Skyrowaki, the leader of the firebugs.

Gross, his companion in crime, and the father of **Brigitti**.

Myrick, the Headquarters detective in whose service Billy worked.

Brigitti, a young Jewess whose fortunes were connected with those of the Bowery Boy through a strange freak of fate.

CHAPTER I.

BOWERY BILLY IN EAST BROADWAY.

"Green bananers!" exclaimed Bowery Billy; and, as an odd sequence to his favorite phrase, he tossed the ripe banana which he was eating into a rubbish barrel and plunged into a narrow alley as if he had been sent for.

The alley was of the "blind" variety, running back from East Broadway. The hour was early morning, and the Jewish tradesmen of the locality were out after the early dollar.

There were hook noses and grasping fingers on every side, and eagle eyes and strident voices eagerly begged for trade. Yet the most of these people were sober and industrious, and Bowery Billy had friends among them, as he had among the lowly of every race in that part of the great city.

Billy had seen a tall, slouching figure sneak into the alley about ten minutes before. Two minutes after that another tall man, with big whiskers and furtive glance had slouched after the first. Sixty seconds later a third man, shorter than the others, but with the same sly, furtive manner, slunk into the same alley.

Bowery Billy stood on the opposite side of the street eating bananas, to polish off a breakfast which he had picked up in "any old way."

"That's the limit, and I sees wot's doin'," was his thought as the third of the suspicious characters dodged into the alley, as has been described.

He did not slink into the passage as the men had done. At the same time, he made the shift so quickly that he was not observed by any individual of the throng which filled sidewalk and street.

The alley was narrow, dark and crooked, for it curved around an irregularly built tenement building which looked as if it had had a corner chipped off by a cyclone.

Overhead, a network of clotheslines had been strung across, and from these all sorts and conditions of wearing apparel flaunted and straddled in shameless antics. A pall of smoke hung over everything, making the place as dark as the open street would have been in the evening.

The Bowery lad had entered the passage so silently that he could not have been heard even if those who preceded him had been listening. Indeed, he moved with the silence of a shadow, but without the guilty stealth that marked the actions of those several men.

Once within the narrow court he kept close to the wall of one of the buildings, against which his form was absolutely invisible.

He advanced with considerable care here, for there was the chance of a pitfall.

At last he paused to listen.

There were plenty of noises from the street; but these were mostly of voices, and Bowery Billy had his ear keyed for sounds of another character.

He had to wait barely three minutes before a fourth figure stole into the alley.

"I knowed there'd be four of 'em," thought the watcher. "There was four w'en I seen der same crowd last night, comin' out of dis same crib, and w'en they stopped on der street and had a confab, and I heard two or t'ree words that set me to thinkin'. Now I spots der crib in which der crowd hibernates. Ho!—green bananers!"

While these thoughts were running through the mind of Bowery Billy he intended to keep his eyes on the form that had just skulked into view.

That had not seemed to be a doubtful or difficult undertaking.

Yet the form had suddenly disappeared—how, whither, wherefore—he did not and could not conceive!

"It melted and run inter der ground, by cripes!" Billy audibly exclaimed.

It seemed as if this were the only explanation. It was a substantial form to start with, of this there could be no doubt; therefore it could not have dissolved as ghosts are supposed to do. There were no means by which it could have ascended up the side of the building. Billy had walked over the very spot where the man had vanished and had discovered no opening in the ground.

"Aw, but dis is rotten luck!" exclaimed the bootblack of the Bowery, in disgust.

He edged his way back to the spot where he had last seen the skulker.

He bent and examined the ground, groped about with his hands—and found nothing.

"It's rotten!" he exclaimed again, his chagrin at the tantalizing failure filling him with an unreasoning sort of impatience and anger against himself.

"I ain't no good w'en it comes to findin' anyt'ing that ain't as plain and easy as der Brooklyn Bridge," he muttered. "I'll hire a blind man ter go round wit' me and show me t'ings dat I can't see wit' my eyes open. I needs ter cultivate der sense of smell, now I knows my eyes ain't good fer nutting! Aw, cripes, Bowery Billiam, yer wants ter go and git a hunch on yerself!"

Billy groped and felt his way clear to the end of the blind alley and back again to the entrance of it on the other side. Then he made the tour along the middle of the passage.

But it seemed to be of no use. He discovered nothing except a single open way leading to the basement of one of the buildings.

This opening was so remote from the place where the man had disappeared that it really threw no light on the mystery.

To have reached that spot from where the man had last been seen would have been impossible without passing close to where Bowery Billy was standing all the while.

It was one of those seemingly simple and yet tantaliz-

ingly insoluble mysteries which are most annoying to the investigator.

"I might jest as well mosey outer here an' go ter sleep," said Billy to himself. "Dere ain't a bit of use of a fool hangin' eround t'inkin' that he'll ever learn anything. Billy of der Bowery has spells of t'inkin' dat he could run der whole Mulberry Street Detective Bureau fer der city, and put der crooks outer biz at der end of der first week. W'en he feels dat way he spreads hisself all over der Bowery and looks at der hotels and railroad lines dat he t'inks of buyin' up and runnin' fer his private 'commerdation. But w'en he gets clear to der top notch in his feelin's, up he runs against some p'n like dis. Den he jest wants ter crawl off and die quick and easy. Green bananers! But Bowery Billy ain't nutting but a lead nickel wit' a hole in it, w'en yer comes ter figger down close ter wot he's worth!"

For the time he felt all that he said about himself to be true.

But after he had given himself the raking that he thought he merited he generally began to feel better. So, in the present case, having fired off the whole of his tough opinion of himself, he began to think of a way of retrieving his lost reputation.

He set himself to watch for more of the men whom he had set out to shadow. While, upon the previous occasions when he had observed them, there had been only four, that did not argue the impossibility of there being more in the gang.

He waited patiently and almost without stirring from where he stood for fully half an hour.

But it was without result. Evidently four numbered the limit.

The morning was advancing. Sounds from the street increased in volume. From open windows came the squalling of babies and the chattering of women.

No part of the great city is so much like a human beehive as this. The old buildings swarm with tenants, and even at night the buzz of life is never quite silenced.

Bowery Billy made another round of the court, hoping to run upon a clew.

It was lighter as the day advanced, although the sky did not clear, and a drizzling rain began to fall.

Billy had to be more careful to keep out of sight. But, by the increased light, he saw that there were open windows in the houses, some of them only a little above the level of the ground.

This presented a possible solution to the mysterious disappearance of the men he was shadowing.

While it did not seem probable that the one he had observed could have done so, yet it was not impossible that he might have slipped through an open window which was quite close to the place where he had last been seen.

"It takes der nerve, but Bowery Billy deserves all dat's comin' ter him ter pay fer his keepin' his eyes shut w'en he orter had 'em open," thought the lad. "I had no biz ter look fer a cinch. If der's somep'n partic'lar tough I deserves ter wade into it. Great bumbleshutes! Billy, yer've goter roll up yer panties and wade, and if yer finds it deep, yer'll have ter take in some wind and swim. Here goes fer desp'rit chances and a cracked nut, if der Bowery bootblack artist brushes up erg'inst der wrong pair of uppers!"

With this characteristic remark Bowery Billy advanced to the open window which was nearest to the spot where he had seen the fourth man at the moment of his disappearance.

He paused for a moment to listen.

He could hear nothing through that window direct. As the inhabitants of that quarter made the most of every square inch of space in the dwellings, it was a little singular that the room into which that window opened did not let out sounds from the occupants.

It was too high from the ground for the boy to look in without climbing so as to bring his face on a level with the sill.

After listening he sprang up and caught hold of the stone window ledge.

He drew himself up until he could look in—that is, had there been nothing to obstruct the view.

But there was a drawn shade on the inside, and a draught from within sucked the dingy shade against the opening. It bellied out like a sail.

Again Billy listened. And again he was rewarded by no sign of occupancy of the space within.

"Here goes fer wot's comin', by cripes!" he muttered.

He pulled himself nimbly up, found space to sit upon the ledge, pulled the shade aside and peered in.

He saw a narrow, irregularly shaped room, crammed with odds and ends of decrepit and broken-down furniture.

He discovered two beds, but, so far as he could observe, the room had no occupants.

"If der blokes went in dis way, dey didn't stop at der vestibule of der 'stablishment," decided Billy. "But it doesn't foller that dey ain't on der premises. It looks like a Sheeny place, all right, and one of der blokes, and likely the four of 'em, were Sheenies. Here I goes, and may der bedbugs have mercy on Bowery Billiam!"

With this the street Arab flung himself into the room, which was far from being light enough for him to make out its contents with anything like distinctness.

The distance to the floor was somewhat greater than he counted on, and he struck with something of a thud. Then, when he took a forward step, he stumbled against a cask which seemed to be filled with a lot of tin cans or some other jangling contents that made a clatter that could have been heard out on the street.

"Green bananers!" ejaculated Bowery Billy.

"Yow!" roared a voice out of the gloom, so close to where the boy was standing at the instant that it nearly took him off his feet.

"Aw, 'the luck!'" groaned Billy. For he realized that he was in for it.

He would have leaped out of the window again and made a break for the street, but he found his feet entangled in a mess of blankets or clothing which seemed to be strewn on the floor, and in turning to escape he was thrown headlong.

Then there was no time to get back to the window, for he saw the form of a man rise up between himself and the way of escape.

"Ho!—Skyrowski—spies!" exclaimed a hoarse voice.

Bowery Billy sprang to his feet and made a break for the opposite side of the room.

There was a bed and any amount of rubbish in the way. But the boy ran, leaped and stumbled, falling and picking himself up again, until he had put the bed and several other articles of furniture in the way of pursuit.

All the while he had his eyes open for a door; but he saw none. In his hurry, the place seemed to be merely clutter and confusion.

At the same time he heard the rumble of angry voices.

CHAPTER II.

BRIGITTI, THE JEWESS.

"Green bananers! but ain't dis der limit fer luck!"

Bowery Billy made no bones of making this comment an audible one.

It was no wonder.

And yet it was not a matter of luck merely, for he realized that he had taken an unnecessary amount of risk in pursuing his investigations.

But he was always doing this. More than once he had plunged headlong into a place where there were unknown and unnamed dangers, when he was hot on the trail of something that he wanted to know about.

He was one of the sort who, when they find themselves in a tight place, have the faculty for hustling out of it somehow.

His brightest ideas came to him when he was in a tight pinch. When everything went smoothly he did not come up to the best that was in him.

As his eyes became accustomed to the twilight that pervaded the room he could see that there were several men who had sprung up from the heaps of bed clothing that strewed the floor.

They had not been on the beds—why, he did not understand, nor did he stop then to wonder at the fact.

They were staring in his direction in a bewildered fashion, as if they had just been awakened from sound slumber.

Now, without taking the time to reason about it, Bowery Billy easily understood that the men, after being out all night, had come here to sleep in the daytime.

This indicated that their mission called for darkness. He had reasons for believing that they worked and plotted by night and remained hidden or slept by day.

Bowery Billy knew that he had not only been heard, but also seen, by at least one of the inmates of the room.

He had seen three men, of this he was sure. There might have been half a dozen in the room, but, after first springing up from the floor where they were evidently lying, they seemed to take especial pains to keep out of sight.

This was the more singular in view of the fact that they were strong enough in numbers to have easily disposed of the boy whom they evidently regarded as a spy.

Billy found it easy to dodge out of sight, as they

seemed to be quite as much afraid of him as he was of them.

"Dey haven't got der nerve of a kitten, by cripes!" thought Billy.

"Jest der samey, it doesn't foller that I could scare der whole crew out of their wits by jest sayin' 'shoo!'"

The men were probably crouching behind some of the articles of furniture, for the boy could hear their voices in a rumbling murmur. They were discussing the intrusion, and a way of disposing of him.

They were certainly not the ordinary sort of crooks and toughs, who, whatever their faults, may not usually be accused of cowardice.

Their whole thought seemed to be for the concealment of their identity.

Bowery Billy realized that there was all the more danger to be apprehended from enemies of this character, for there could be no open fight. When he might believe himself to be the safest, his peril might be the greatest.

By this time his eyes had become accustomed to the sort of twilight that pervaded the room, and he could see that there was a door a little way to the right of the spot where he was crouching.

"It'll be me bum luck ter find it locked w'en I git to it," he thought. "But, jest der samey, it's der t'ing I've goter try fer. They've got a cinch on me if I stays here till they gets ready to do me up. I'm like a mice in a pail of swill. Green bananers!"

Bowery Billy crouched close to the floor and crawled cautiously in the direction of the door.

It did not take him long to get to the goal, and, for a wonder, he did not bump against any of his enemies. He reached up for the knob, turned it, and the door swung outward.

"I gets t'rough stayin' here, Mr. Skyrowski," muttered Bowery Billy, as he slipped through the open door.

At the same moment he heard a rush of forms across the room, and even as he was slipping through the doorway the tall Polish Jew whom he had just called by name loomed up so close to the boy that the latter barely escaped the long, grasping fingers that were stretched out to detain him.

Billy slammed the door in the face of the man and fumbled for a means of fastening it.

He found a bolt and slipped it into its socket just as

his pursuer flung himself against the door with all his weight and strength.

The door shook on its hinges, and for a moment it seemed as if it must give way under the shock.

But it held, and, as the attack was not immediately repeated, Billy had a breathing spell.

He was intent upon getting out of the place without further delay. He had not found out much about those he had set himself to shadow, it was true, but he had been too rash, and the opportunity was lost. Yet his audacity would not be without results, since he had obtained the name of the leading spirit of the gang, and knew the place where they spent their sleeping hours.

Billy turned to see what sort of a room he had gotten into.

As he did so he heard a low, startled exclamation in a sweet, feminine voice, and saw a young girl, a year or so younger than himself, staring at him from an open doorway.

She had a grocery package on her arm. She looked frightened, and nearly let the parcel fall.

She was dark and marvelously beautiful. Bowery Billy had a good eye for pretty girls, and this one, plainly a Jewess, as he mentally expressed it, "took the cake."

"Green bananers!" he exclaimed.

She only stared in silence.

"Yer needn't be scared, miss," the Bowery Arab next said. "I ain't a cannibal, though if I was, I'll be popped if I wouldn't t'ink you was jest a peach ter tempt me appetite!"

Billy had a pleasant voice, and he was smiling so good-naturedly, and withal had such a friendly appearance, that the girl seemed to be somewhat reassured.

She placed the parcel on a chair and then advanced shyly toward him.

"How did you get in here?" she asked, in English that was as pure as any that could be heard.

"Right t'rough dis door. I come in a hurry, and there's an old jay on der other side that was anxious ter shake hands wit' me. I was shy and skipped in here. I takes der liberty ter t'row der bolt, fer biz was pressin' wit' me, and I didn't feel like goin' t'rough any social rinktums."

"You came in through that doorway?" the girl exclaimed, in evident surprise.

"Sure t'ing."

"I supposed it was bolted on this side. I never leave it unfastened."

"Somebody else has been monkeyin' wit' der bolt, den. It opened as easy as a clam."

She sprang to the door and examined the bolt. At the same time one of the men on the other side shook the door, and she could see that the bolt was slipping out of the socket on account of the jar.

The door sagged a little, and on that account the bolt was not secure. Shaking was liable to make it slip back.

That explained how it came to be unfastened.

"I would have been frightened to death if I had known!" she exclaimed, as she pressed the bolt back with all the strength of her slender fingers.

"Then der crowd on der other side ain't your folks?" Billy asked.

"Oh, no."

"Yer don't look like 'em, dat's a fack. Dey ain't peaches, not to any great extent. Say, if dat guy don't quit shakin' der door he'll have der bolt loose ag'in."

Billy pressed the bolt back into its socket, and at the same time looked for something with which he might fasten it in place.

"Gimme a hammer and nail, if yer got such a t'ing handy," he said.

The girl did not hesitate to comply with the request. Although Bowery Billy was unknown to her, it was plain that she stood more in fear of the men on the other side of that door than she did of him.

She brought a small hammer and a crooked nail, which had been drawn from a box.

He drove the nail into the door in such a way that the bolt could not be slipped back.

"Now old Skyrowski can't git t'rough wit'out breakin' down the door," said Billy.

"Oh, thank you. Do you know Skyrowski?" the girl asked, looking into the eyes of the Bowery lad in a searching way.

"Not to speak of. He was anxious ter make me acquaintance jest now, as I said, but I hates ter git chummy wit' his sort wit'out a reg'lar interdiction. I's partic'lar erbout dem t'ings."

"You do not seem to be so particular about an introduction to me," said the other, with just the hint of a smile about her lips.

"That's because I'm pecooliar. But I'm willin' ter in-

terduce meself, jest the samey. I'm a Bowery kid, and I blacks shoes as a reg'lar biz, w'en I ain't doin' nutting else. Dey calls me Bowery Billy."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Bowery Billy," smiled the girl.

"But yer doosn't give me any name to call yer by. It ain't fair."

"Do you want one?"

"Sure t'ing."

"Call me Brigitti."

"Every day in der week if I gits der chance. Say, I got inter dat hole sort of by accident, and I come pretty clost ter havin' a worse accident in tryin' ter git out ergin. They wanted ter detain me mighty bad."

"Why did you come here? You had nothing to do with them, I'm sure?"

"I wasn't chummy wit' 'em, I don't pertend."

"You crawled into the room to sleep, perhaps?" pursued the girl.

"Not presactly. Say, have they anyt'ing to do wit' you and yer folks?"

The girl was silent.

"They have nothing to do with me," she answered at last, in a low voice.

"And yer folks?" persisted Bowery Billy.

"My father and Skyrowski are friends," she admitted.

"And yer a Jew?"

"My mother was a Jewess. My father pretends to be one, but I know he is not. My mother told me that she committed the sin of marrying one who was not of her people."

"And old Skyrowski?" pursued Bowery Billy.

"He has deserted the God of his fathers!" said Brigitti, dropping her eyes.

This was important, as Bowery Billy realized.

With all of their faults, he knew that the Jewish race furnished but few members of the criminal class. They were grasping, sometimes dishonest, and there were petty thieves among them. But seldom was one found guilty of one of the higher crimes.

This had puzzled him, because he had the best of reasons for suspecting that Skyrowski and his companions were criminals of the deepest dye.

For some time there had been fires in various parts of the city, of incendiary origin, but so enshrouded in mystery that the police had been baffled in their efforts

to discover the motives for the crimes, or the ones who committed them.

Many fires are set by persons who are suspected of wishing to obtain the insurance on the buildings burned.

Now and then one is kindled for the object of revenge.

But these fires could not have been set for either of these motives; and yet it seemed to be established that they had originated from the torch of the incendiary.

Bowery Billy had struck upon a clew, purely by accident, because he was almost constantly in the locality where the incendiaries were supposed to be in hiding. He had reported it to the police.

"Follow it up for us," was the order from headquarters. "Our men are spotted if they go prying about in such places. You won't be suspected of being a spy. You are a little chap, and you've got cheek. Go ahead, Billy, and if you strike anything, report."

The young street boy ferret was acting upon these instructions when he set himself to watch in the alley off East Broadway at that early morning hour.

And now it seemed that Skyrowski was a recreant representative of his race, and that the father of this beautiful dark-eyed Jewess was a partner of the other. Then there were two or three others in the gang.

This was a rather important batch of facts to find out the first trip, and Bowery Billy did not feel that he had had his trouble and risk for naught, even if this was all he accomplished for the day.

He looked sharply at the face of the girl.

She seemed also to be studying his countenance.

It seemed almost as if she might be reading his thoughts.

He realized that it would not be wise to have her know the character of his mission to that quarter—at least, not quite yet.

Those on the other side of the door had for the time ceased their attempts to force it open. But this did not argue that they would give up their pursuit of Bowery Billy thus easily.

They might go around and demand admittance from the other way.

Brigitti seemed to have thought of this, for at that moment she said:

"If they think you were spying on them you are not safe here. They do not take kindly to strangers. They

take them all for spies. It is the same with my father. You must go at once."

As she spoke she opened the door by which she had entered.

"Follow me, Bowery Billy," she said.
And he obeyed.

CHAPTER III.

FRIEND OR FOE?

Bowery Billy followed Brigitti out of the neat room, which was evidently the product of the girl's house-keeping, along dingy, ill-smelling passages, down a short flight of stairs, and to a door that evidently opened upon the street.

"This way out to East Broadway," said Brigitti, as she turned back the bolt of the outside door.

"And yer t'inks dis is der last I'll see of yer?" Billy asked, looking into the face of the girl.

"It will not be safe for you to come here again," she answered.

"Yer t'inks yer father'll do some kickin' if yer receives comp'ny?"

"He would be furious if he saw you here."

"Is he likely to come in pretty soon?"

"At any time—now."

The eyes of the girl dropped as she said this, and Billy's curiosity was aroused.

"You must go—go!" she urged, with her hand on the door, ready to open it to let him out.

"See here, Brigitti, I've acted all square an' straight, haven't I?"

"Yes."

"Yer don't t'ink I wants ter steal nutting?"

"No."

"Den wot's der hurry erbout my gittin' outer here?"

"For your own safety, and because—"

"Well, because wot?"

"My father would do something terrible if he were to find you here."

"Dat's all right. But he'd have ter git his flippers onter me 'fore he could damage me much. Say, was yer dad in der other room wit' Skyrowski?"

"I—I don't know."

"Aw, cut it out, Brigitti! Come off! Course yer knows. Wot's der use?"

Brigitti was trembling. Now she laid a hand on the arm of the boy and she spoke pleadingly, saying:

"Please go! It will be bad for me if you are found here. To save me, please go!"

"Dat's all right, and I goes. But I comes ergin—see? And—say—one t'ing more. Yer won't tell Skyrowski nor yer dad wot I axed yer erbout 'em?"

"No, no!"

"Stick to it. I'll do all right by yer. I ain't der sort ter go back on anybody wot uses me white. But if anybody tries ter t'row me down I makes a stiff kick, see."

Bowery Billy touched the hand of the girl in a friendly way, and then allowed her to open the door and let him out.

Brigitti did not speak as he went; but, glancing back, he saw her peering out through a crack in the door, and it seemed to him that there was an odd expression in her dark eyes.

"She's a queer kid!" was his verdict, as he found himself once more in the motley crowd that filled the narrow sidewalks of East Broadway.

He had scarcely left the door before he saw a tall man, whom he recognized as Skyrowski, accompanied by another, who was much shorter and of stouter build, come out from the alley by way of which Billy had entered the building.

"Green bananers! But dis is a good time ter mosey!" thought Bowery Billy.

And he crossed the street, taking care that he should not be observed by his enemies, who did not seem to be looking for him on the street.

Evidently they did not think he had yet escaped from the house.

"Aw, but some of der luck goes my way, don't it?" thought Billy.

He made his way back to the Bayard Street corner of the Bowery and was soon engaged shining a pair of number elevens for a sporty-looking young fellow, who was puffing luxuriously at a Porto Rico stogie, that made a fog in the air like the fumes of a tannery.

The young fellow was, off and on, quite a friend of Bowery Billy's. He ought to be recognized by the title of Dan, the bully.

This young fellow had heard reminiscences of the old palmy days of the street when the "Bowery Boy" ruled the thoroughfare and struck terror to the hearts of visitors from other parts of the city, as well as awe to the toughs from other cities.

Dan, the bully, was ambitious to be a Bowery boy of the grand, rough-and-tough old type.

In some ways he played the rôle all right.

But well did Bowery Billy know that he lacked nerve. More than once the bootblack ferret found opportunity to "take him down."

"What's ther nooze?" queried Dan, after a period of grand silence.

He had seated himself in Billy's chair without a word, and likewise without comment the young street Arab had set to work.

"Tough luck fer me, Dan," said Billy.

"What's happened now?"

"I've goter give up me stand."

"Yer chair here at this corner, yer mean?"

"Sure t'ing."

"Why's that?"

"Jake, der cop, says so. He give me der tip. He says ther cap'n over ter der station says so, and wot der cap'n says goes—you knows dat, Dan."

"But what's the objection to yer keepin' yer chair here, where it's been reg'lar for two years? You've got a good run of trade, and I thought yer was liked."

"Aw, it ain't me they're kickin' on."

"Wot is it, then?"

"I hates to tell yer, Danny. Me and you have been good friends, and yer've done me two or t'ree good turns. I don't want ter hurt yer feelin's, Danny."

By this time Dan, the bully, had his curiosity worked up to a high pitch.

Billy had finished one shoe, and was polishing the other.

"What in thunder have I got to do with their telling ye to move yer stand, Billy? Why, I've got some influence in the ward, I'm thinkin', and I ain't goin' to have you crowded out. Not a bit of it. I'm a voter, and I've got a pull in der precinct."

"No use, Danny. I ain't blamin' yer, though, if yer'd been a little more considerate—but never mind erbout it now der mischief's done."

"Jerusalem, Billy, tell me what's the trouble? I haven't said a word agin' you. I've sent yer a lot of trade."

"I knows it, and that's w'y it cuts me so deep. It goes clear to der bone, Dan."

The bully could hardly sit still. His face was purple. "See here!" he exclaimed. "I'll go right over to the

precinct station and tell 'em what's what! I ain't goin' to have ye crowded from here—see?"

"Don't yer say a t'ing, Danny. It'll put yer in a bad hole if yer does. I can build up in a new place, though it'll take time, and I can't 'ford der loss of time."

Danny sprang out of the chair. The second shoe was not quite finished, but he did not care for that. His big fists were doubled and his eyes blazed.

"Look 'ere, Billy!" he raved. "I'll give yer t'ree minutes to tell me wot yer mean! If yer don't tell in that time I'll begin work on ye!"

"Don't be rash, Danny!" pleaded Bowery Billy.

"Den tell me."

"All right, only yer goter promise me somep'n."

"What do ye want me to promise?"

"Not to git mad w'en I tells yer the trut'"

"I promise dat, Billy. I ain't a sneak."

"Yer won't be mad w'en I tells yer wot Jake says the precinct cap'n says?"

"Course I won't."

"Well, den, it's on account of yer comin' so reg'lar to have yer shoes shined by me. If yer patronized somebody else once in a while it would be all right. But yer never does. Ain't that right, Dan?"

Dan began to back away. His face was black as a thundercloud.

"See here!" he began.

"Yer promised not ter take offense, Dan," Billy reminded him.

"If yer workin' a sell on me, Billy——"

"Yer see, Danny, it takes a 'normous ermount of blackin' ter keep such shoes as yours in shape, and they've been hintin' 'round that me and you was bought up by der blackin' trust—that we gits favors and that sort of t'ing—see? And der trade has been kickin' and dat makes it uncomfor'ble fer the cops. Dey says it's kick, kick all der time, and they can't stand fer it!"

Dan, the bully, let out a roar like that of a mad bull.

He reached for Bowery Billy's shoulder.

But the shoulder was not where he could quite reach it, for the reason that Billy dodged.

Danny made a rush to catch the bootblack; but Billy, light and nimble as a deer, dodged this way and that, now giving the other a straight run for it—a sprint of fifty feet or so—and then, by a quick turn, doubling on his track and letting the heavier fellow rush past him.

Dan soon got out of breath. He could not have

caught Bowery Billy if he had tried for a week, and he soon came to realize it.

Then, the chase had called a crowd of the *habitués* of the locality about them. All sorts of shouts, which would have shamed the yells from the bleachers in a baseball game, filled the air.

The Bowery kid was out in force. Most of them knew Billy, and many, to their cost, knew Dan, the bully, for he had a trick of giving one of them a thrashing now and then in return for some fancied offense.

Now Dan was getting the worst of it.

They knew that Dan and Billy were friends, after a fashion, and they knew that Billy could get the better of the big fellow every day in the week if he tried.

"Go it, Sporty!" was yelled from the crowd.

"Slide, checkered britches!" howled one.

"We puts our money on der duck legs," said another.

"Sli-i-i-de!" roared a half dozen, all in the same breath.

Dan pulled up at last, gasping for breath, his face red, the perspiration streaming from under his hat.

Bowery Billy danced along back to his chair and coolly seated himself in it.

Dan approached him, still wrathful.

"Aw, cut it out, Danny!" said the street Arab, without offering to renew the race.

"I tell ye, Billy, I ain't goin' to stand for that sort of thing!" growled Dan, the bully.

"Sit down fer it, den. It's all der same ter me. Green bananers! Wot yer kickin' erbout? Yer promised not ter git mad if I told yer der trut'."

"Ye didn't tell the truth."

"Come off, Danny!"

"I've half a mind ter wipe up the street with ye!" snarled Dan.

"Better not do it. I ain't wort' der trouble. Yer can't learn me not to do them t'ings. I jest has ter, Dan. And yer knows yerself that yer've got a gosh-awful pair of feet, and it ain't profitable fer any man ter black yer shoes fer a nickel. Yer wants ter cough up fifteen cents every time yer sets down in der chair, and yer won't be boddered wit' dem jokes. A man wit' such feet as you've got no biz ter expect ter git erlong at der same price that other fellers git—see? It ain't right, Danny!"

"You jest wants to shut up about my feet, Billy, and this is the last time I'm tellin' ye!" warned Dan.

"Much erbliged fer yer tellin' me der last time ergin. Yer've said dat same t'ing erbout a hundred times. But

yer waltzes up with der same shoos ter have 'em blacked, and den outs wit' der same warnin' erginst my speakin' of der size. Aw, Dan, but yer easy!"

Billy was swinging his legs unconcernedly.

Dan abruptly turned his back upon the bootblack and glared at the crowd of hoodlums who were guying him from every side.

"Git off the earth, every one of ye, or I'll push yer faces for ye!" he roared.

And the crowd scattered.

"I'll see ye later. Ye don't want to make an enemy of me, Billy Barlow, for I'm a bad man, get me roused. I'm slow to anger, but——"

"Green bananers!" said Billy, with a grin.

Dan, the bully, strutted back to the street, lighting another stogie as he went.

Bowery Billy gazed after him with his good-natured grin.

"Aw, but if Dan wouldn't brag, he wouldn't be such a bad lot, after all," thought the bootblack. "Anyhow, he'll fergit it by ter-morrer and be eround fer another shine. Great bumbleshutes! But he has awful feet, dough! He oughter have his shoes blacked on der installment plan. It's too much ter ask a feller to do all der same trip. It ain't right!"

Another customer came along then, and for two hours Billy had all he could do.

At last there was a lull in business, and in a short time Billy went for a lunch.

There was a cheap restaurant in the vicinity, which he patronized frequently.

While he was eating the sandwiches and coffee provided, sitting up to a counter, a girl came into the place and approached him shyly.

He stared at her in astonishment.

She raised her hand to her lips as a sign for silence, and motioned for him to follow her out.

He hurriedly gulped down the rest of his coffee and went out.

The girl was Brigitti, and she was waiting for him in a doorway.

"I have something to show you, Bowery Billy," were her first words.

"Green bananers!" exclaimed the boy ferret, too much surprised to say anything else.

"Will you come with me?" she asked.

"Where to?"

"To my home, in East Broadway."

"Wot fer?"

"You will know when you get there. It would have been better if I had not hurried you away so quickly this morning."

"Well, dat's funny! I t'ought yer was in a nawful rush ter git rid of me. But I told yer I'd come back anyway, didn't I?"

"Yes. But it would not have been best for you to come when I didn't know that you were coming. It will be all right now, and you will find out something that will interest you."

The girl was smiling, and she was so sweet and coaxing in her ways that Billy was thrown off his guard.

For that matter, why should he have suspected that all was not right, after her friendliness in the morning?

"Sure, I goes wit' you, Brigitti. How erbout yer old man?"

"There is no danger to you from him."

"Is he gone?"

"Quite likely. But you needn't worry, in any case. I want to see you and show you something that will give you a great surprise."

This was more than the curiosity of Bowery Billy could withstand.

For that matter, he intended to visit the place again in any event.

They were soon at the door of the East Broadway tenement house.

She ushered him into the house and closed the door.

She had scarcely done so before two powerful men leaped upon the bootblack and flung him to the floor!

Was pretty Brigitti a friend or foe to Billy of the Bowery?

CHAPTER IV.

SKYROWSKI, THE FIREBUG.

Bowery Billy struggled desperately to throw off his assailants.

But he could not have been expected to do so, for either of them would have been more than a match for him in a fair fight.

His resistance only made it necessary for them to handle him the more roughly. They beat him just the same, and in a brief space of time they had him helpless and a handkerchief bound over his mouth so that he could not utter an outcry.

From the beginning of the fight Billy had had no chance to look to see if Brigitte, the pretty Jewess, was still by.

After he had been rendered helpless, however, he was able to see that the girl was not in the entry way. He judged that she must have gone up the short flight of stairs to the living room where he had first seen her in the morning.

The men who had downed him also beat a retreat and for a short time he saw neither of them.

He was left lying senselessly on the floor of the small entrance hall of the old tenement house.

A rage filled the heart of Bowery Billy as he thought of the manner in which he had been entrapped.

"Aw, but it's rotten!" was the thought that seethed in his brain.

"Dat girl jest played der decoy duck game! She's a peach, she is! Likely dey'll murder me now. But I ain't hatin' 'em for it. It's der girl—she t'ought jest because she's pretty and I was soft dat I'd be easy game. And she hit der trut'. I was easy, all right. She pulled me inter der trap. Likely the men hired her to do it. Perhaps her old man t'reatened ter thrash her if she wouldn't do der t'ing, and she didn't have der nerve ter refuse. Jest der way wit' some girls. Dey t'ink they've goter do jest wot their dads tell 'em. They'll go back on anybody if only somebody dat has der right ter boss 'em tells 'em to."

Bowery Billy was not a girl hater by any means.

He had known some girls to act a treacherous and cowardly part when put in a tight place. But this was the first time that he had been betrayed by a girl.

He had had girls lie to him, and try to trick him, more than once, when he was pursuing some inquiry in the city. But never before had one deliberately imposed upon his trust in her.

The entry way where the fight had taken place was unlighted, and he had but indistinctly seen the faces of the men who had overcome him.

He thought one of them was the Polish Jew, Skyrowski. The other was a shorter man, and Billy suspected that he was the father of Brigitte, a man whose name he had not yet heard spoken.

He was not left in the entry way longer than ten minutes.

At the end of that time he was picked up by the taller of the two men, whom he was now certain was Skyrowski, and carried up the short flight of stairs to the room through which he had escaped at an early hour that morning. Then the door which he had fastened with the nail was opened and Billy was taken into the place where he had so narrowly escaped capture upon his former visit.

He was tossed upon one of the beds, and the door shut and fastened.

Then the handkerchief was untied from his mouth.

Skyrowski and the shorter man stood beside him, and the former was smiling exultantly.

"Well, Bowery William!" he exclaimed, in excellent English.

"Aw, don't crow over me!" said Billy. "I'm easy, and all dat, but it wa'n't a fair play, and yer knows it. Yer might know dat I'd trust der girl."

The two men exchanged glances.

Their expressions were puzzling to the young prisoner. For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Skyrowski said:

"We haven't harmed you yet, Bowery William, and we may not have to do it, though it looks rather dark just now. If you can answer a few questions straight, and give a fair bill of health, maybe we can let you out of this easy. What have you to say?"

"I says nutting," said Billy, shortly.

"It will be well for you to say something. We haven't kidnaped you in this fashion without good reason, and you may bet heavy on it."

"I ain't talkin'. If I says one t'ing, yer'll say dat's my finish, and if I says somep'n else, yer'll say I'm lyin' and that'll be my finish, sure."

"So you think it's the end of you, anyhow?"

"Looks that way. But yer'll git 'lectrocutioned if yer does me up. Yer next door to nabbed, dead sure, and yer doesn't want ter t'ink yer'll git out of bein' ketched —see?"

This was bold talk for the young prisoner. But he was in a bold mood, a mood bordering on the desperate, for everything seemed to have turned against him just when he thought he was going to make a clear case against the firebugs and gain the commendation of a certain headquarters detective, and the approval of the precinct officers.

"You are a sharp one," said Skyrowski. "But your sharpness won't pay. You came here this morning to spy on us—you know that?"

"Well, if you knows it, and I knows it, wot's der use of talkin'?"

"Admit or deny it—I'm not joking!" said the other, sternly.

"And wot if I was spyin'? Does it foller that I was goin' ter do yer any mischief? I crawled in here dis mornin' because I t'ought it was a chance fer free lodg'in's. I was up about all night last night, and I was bum sleepy."

"Too thin, William. You came here to spy."

"And wot good did it do? I didn't hear none of der talk."

"You couldn't have heard much, for we were asleep when you bounced into the room, though it wasn't the fault of your intentions. You came here to spy."

"Say it ag'in, w'y don't yer?"

"I want to know why you were spying. It wasn't on your own hook. You were doing it for somebody else."

"If yer knows so much, wot's der use of yer wastin' yer breath askin' questions?"

Skyrowski shrugged his shoulders.

He realized that he was going the wrong way to work to get at any facts from this cool and defiant lad.

"Who sent you here to spy?" the man asked, bluntly.

"Now yer talkin'. If I was answerin' questions, dat's der sort dat I'd jest love ter answer. As it is, I t'inks I'll be shy wit' tellin' t'ings."

"There are ways in which we can force you to tell what we wish to know."

"Dat's all right. I ain't in a posish ter dictate terms. It's your say and my go."

"Another question, then—one that I fancy you'll be willing to answer."

"Fire away, Sky-high-sky!" said Billy.

"Did the girl, Brigitte, tell you anything about us?"

It was on the tongue of Bowery Billy to repeat all that Brigitte had told him, although that was not a great deal.

It was but a natural impulse with him in retaliation for the trick which she had played on him.

"She deserves it!" thought Bowery Billy. "She's der sort ter go back on her dad one minute and then go back on der one dat she was chummy wit' der next minute."

But something in the crafty eyes of Skyrowski made him hesitate.

Was the man trying to make him betray Brigitte, or was he merely fishing for pointers, and counting on the

boy's resentment against the girl prompting him to tell more than he would otherwise have done?

This was the query that occurred to the Bowery Arab. And he hastily decided not to fall into any traps, however enticingly they might be baited.

"How yer t'ink she had time ter tell me anyt'ing?" he returned.

"That isn't saying that she didn't."

"Aw, I ain't sayin' nutting."

"You are bound to force us to resort to severe measures, I see."

"I ain't forcein' nutting, Mr. Sky-high-sky. Wot I wants is ter go back to me biz, that is sufierin' fer attention at dis hour of der day."

"You are a boothblack, and you have a chair near the corner of Bowery and Bayard Street. Is that right?"

"Sure t'ing."

"I got a shine there the other day, and I noticed that you looked at me as if yer wanted to be sure to know me the next time you saw me."

"I always does that, as some of der fellers tries ter hang me up fer der price of a shine, and I wants ter be able to spot 'em."

Skyrowski scowled. After a moment of consideration he drew his companion aside and they held a brief but animated discussion, of which Bowery Billy was evidently the subject.

They returned presently. Billy, meanwhile, had had time to do some thinking.

"I'm in a bad hole, all right!" he decided. "Dey got me right in der soup. If I tells 'em wot they wants ter know, then they'll do me. If I refuse to talk, den they'll do me. If I fakes a yarn, they'll be sure to git onto it, and know it's a fake, and den they'll do me! Green bananers! But I'm done anyhow, unless I strikes a streak of luck. And it's all because dat pretty Jew girl t'ought I was a easy mark—an' she t'ought right!"

The more he reasoned over the situation the more hopeless it looked.

Yet, when he tried to feel resentful toward Brigitte, her pretty, friendly face seemed to rise up before his mind's eye to reproach him.

It was hard to believe that she could be so treacherous.

It is always hard to believe in the treachery of one who is agreeable in every way when we are in their presence.

Billy was not one to be easily fooled. But this was a case in which it was little wonder that he had been taken

in—that is, if Brigitti had really intended to betray him into the hands of his enemies, the Gotham firebugs.

This was what it had amounted to, in any case, and until there was some better explanation of her conduct, there was no reason for his having faith in the strange girl.

The very fact that she had so suddenly disappeared after she had conducted him back to the house was in itself suspicious. Then, now he thought of it, it seemed as if her pretext for inducing him to come had been a flimsy one.

"We have decided what it's best to do with you," said Skyrowski.

"All right, old man. But yer wants ter be doin' it, as time is pressin' wit' me, and I've got to git back to me biz," said Billy, coolly.

"You have the gall, youngster, I'll say that for you."

"It all comes in wid my trade. But have yer say, and den I'll be goin'."

"You won't go at all unless you come to our terms."

"Aw, come off, old Sky-high-sky!"

"That isn't my name."

"Wot does I care erbout yer name? Yer are a Rooshian, and yer pertend ter be a Jew, but der Rooshians wouldn't own yer, and der Jews would t'row yer outer their synagogue, heels over stomach. Say, yer wants ter go have yer face changed--it ain't der kind they likes ter see on a public street!"

In such a situation as this a spirit of audacity and recklessness seemed to possess the nature of Bowery Billy.

In truth, he felt that these men would never let him out of this place alive unless something little short of a miracle should interpose to save him.

They knew, just as well as he did, that he had come there in the first place to spy on them. He could not give them a pretext for his visit to the place that they would swallow as the truth.

He knew that he could not clear himself from the suspicion of being a spy. And spies, whether in war or in a criminal camp, are not often allowed to live.

The companion of Skyrowski, whose name had not been spoken in the hearing of Bowery Billy, glanced at his partner with sudden significance. At the same time a dull red glow crept into the cheeks of the Polish Jew.

Billy was audacious; but audacity, at times, may win in a great crisis.

CHAPTER V.

"GOOD-BY, BOWERY WILLIAM!"

"Bowery William," said Skyrowski, after another brief pause, "we happen to know that this is not the first time you have played the spy. At the same time, we won't pretend that we know why you did it. Perhaps you are one of the sort who are curious when you observe anything that you don't quite understand. Perhaps you think you can get money by prying into the business of other people. You have good nerve, that is; if you realize your position. But I'm more inclined to believe that you think this is a mere bluff, and that, after a little scare, we'll let you go as well off as you came, or maybe, you expect we'll try to bribe you."

"Now, Bowery William, you have a different sort of man to deal with than you think. We're no common toughs, and if you're as sharp as you seem to be you ought to know it. Just what you do think we are I confess that I'm rather curious to know. There is a chance for you to get out of this without serious trouble. There is a chance for your never getting out at all—and that's the bigger chance, let me tell you. If you've any sense you'll go easy about exasperating me, for it is what I say that goes. I'm going to give you the chance. I'm going to make no definite threats. I merely caution you, and give you warning that you have touched the limit. Do you catch my meaning?"

The dark eyes of Skyrowski fairly blazed as he looked into the face of the Bowery boy ferret.

Billy knew all the while that he had a hard man to deal with. He knew that Skyrowski was no common crook. The man used good English, and he bore every mark of intelligence, and, although his attire was rough and seedy, it did not follow that this was because he was indifferent to his personal appearance.

If you have two bitter enemies in the world, one of them intelligent and the other ignorant, have the most care for the knowing one, for he may outwit you at a time when you believe that all is going well.

The other will tell you just what he means to do. He will roar out his threats, and when he comes to the execution of them he is liable to back down because he has not calculated the cost when he started out.

Bowery Billy, even in the brief career that had been his, had found out the kind of foes that was the more dangerous.

In the first place he had assumed that Skyrowski was

an ignorant, unreasoning native of Polish Russia, and that it would be easy to calculate just what he would be likely to do under certain circumstances.

Instead, he found him keen, intelligent and probably educated.

His rough attire and appearance were really no more nor less than a disguise.

Still, about his companion, Billy was in doubt.

He had not even heard the man speak a word in English.

All this went through the mind of Bowery Billy very swiftly, and, so far as the men were concerned, they did not realize that he was considering the matter at all before he spoke.

"Green bananers!" he exclaimed, to fill the pause. At the same time he actually tried to look frightened, and found it hard to do so, although he well knew that he had probably never before been in greater danger.

"Are you ready to talk, Bowery William?" asked Skyrowski.

"I dunno wot yer wants me ter say," said Billy.

"Tell me why you were spying on us this morning?"

"I told yer that I t'ought I would crawl in here and have a snooze."

"But that was a lie."

"I knows it is!"

"Then tell the truth."

"Dat's embarrassin'—see?"

"I dare say. But out with it."

"Ter tell der trut', a feller hired me to watch dis place and report ter him wot I seen here. Now I've give er-way der whole biz, and he'll kill me if he finds it out!" said Billy, desperately.

The feeling which he exhibited was well feigned, but Skyrowski was observing him with eyes that saw a great deal.

"Who hired you to spy upon this place?" he asked.

"I hates ter give him erway."

"Why?"

"Because he's done der square t'ing by me, an' he's promised bigger t'ings yet if I makes good."

Billy spoke so simply that it was evident Skyrowski was inclined to believe his explanation.

"I'm tellin' him a nawful fairy tale," thought the boy. "But if I doesn't fake somep'n I'll never live ter git outen dis place."

"You will have to tell me the man's name," insisted Skyrowski.

"He'll kill me if he finds out I done it."

"And you will die here if you refuse. You may take your choice."

"I's tough, but I s'pose I might skin outer der way of der other bloke. Yer seems ter have der call on me. I'll have ter give yer der name."

As a matter of fact, Bowery Billy did not have to invent the whole of the statement which he was about to make. Nor was he betraying any confidence in doing so that could possibly injure anybody.

The important point for him was that he should not reveal to the firebugs the fact that he was a secret spy in the employ of the detective bureau of New York.

His usefulness to Myrick, the detective, depended upon the absolute secrecy of his connection with the city service.

"Der name of der bloke is Buffington, and he is a rich Wall Street chap. Yer've heard of him—and I guess yer has reason ter know the sort he is."

"Buffington! Devils!" breathed Skyrowski.

He drew his breath hard without speaking again for several minutes. His companion stared at him and moved his lips. But he did not speak.

Bowery Billy was somewhat taken aback by these evidences of excitement on the part of his captors.

It was more than he had looked for.

He had the best of reasons for knowing that Skyrowski would recognize the name of Buffington. But he did not understand why the name should excite him so excessively.

The next action on the part of the Polish firebug sent the heart of the boy into his mouth.

The man suddenly bent over him, flung him back on the bed and seized his throat in a viselike grip.

Bound hand and foot as he was, Billy could make no resistance. He could only writhe helplessly, his face growing black, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

There was no halfway about the feelings of Bowery Billy at that instant.

The audacity all went out of him in that mad gasping for the breath that was absolutely required to keep him alive for another minute.

"I've goter go dis time!" was the wild thought that flashed through his brain.

But, even as it began to grow dark around him, and the face of his assailant appeared to his distorted vision

like the countenance of a gorilla, the clutch on the boy's throat was relaxed.

Weak and limp, Bowery Billy could only lie and gasp for breath, staring up into the cruel face of the firebug.

"Buffington!" again breathed the man.

Then he turned to his companion and once more took him aside.

The consultation was a brief one, but it gave Bowery Billy time to regain his breath, and, in a measure, his strength also.

But his courage—or, rather, his confidence in his own ability to get out of the scrape—did not come back then. He had no further temptation to be audacious.

Skyrowski had a different light in his eyes as he once more faced his prisoner.

But he did not seem so fierce or dangerous as he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I know the sort that Buffington is. He is one of the men who ought to be marked for death. But what am I saying? Yet it doesn't matter what I say to you now. It will never get to other ears, of that I'm certain."

In this remark there was a significance that Bowery Billy would have caught had his brain not been quite so bewildered by the struggle for life which he had just been through.

His thoughts were racing through his brain too rapidly just then for them to be quite clear.

"Buffington had a warehouse on der East Side burn up erbout t'ree weeks ago," said Billy, half musingly. "And he knowed dat it was set afire. He wanted me ter shudder dis place. He t'ought der ones dat set der fire hung out here. But I ain't goin' ter tell him nutting, not if yer lets me go. Dat's der trut'!"

The face of Skyrowski did not change.

He gave no sign as to whether Billy could obtain mercy from him, or not.

"Buffington hired you to spy for him, did he?" pursued the firebug.

"Dat's der game. But, as I says——"

"Never mind what you say. I'll make terms later—if I ever make them. How long since he asked you to do this?"

"Erbout a week."

"And was this morning the first time that you came here to watch?"

"Yes."

"Why were you so slow about it?"

"Because I was on der wrong track."

"Didn't you shadow me until to-day?"

"Once or twice. But I lost yer. Yer a sly one."

"What made you suspect me?"

"Because Buffington said that one Skyrowski used to be in his employ, and dat yer had a row, and dat yer was a sort of—blessed if I 'member wot he called yer."

"Anarchist!" breathed Skyrowski, so low that Bowery Billy barely caught the word.

As a matter of fact, Billy had been told by Myrick that Skyrowski was a hater of the rich and prosperous, and of every kind of authority.

The Bowery lad was bidding for the man's confidence now, and he imagined that the face of the other looked less forbidding than it had a minute before.

"That is all right, and what Buffington may think I am doesn't matter. What he tried to do matters more. He hired you to spy. Well and good. Have you reported anything to him yet?"

"Not a t'ing."

"Why not?"

"There was nutting ter report."

"Haven't you seen him since you were here this morning?"

"Naw."

"You swear it?"

"Sure t'ing. I didn't have no time. Den I wanted ter find out more 'fore I told him wot I'd seen."

"Now, if I were to set you free you would have something rich to tell, wouldn't you?"

"I ain't goin' ter tell nuttin, dat is, if yer'll do der square t'ing by me."

"What would you call the square thing, for instance?"

"Aw, jest let me go, me ter promise ter keep me mouth shut, and you ter promise ter pay me a bonus. I'm on der make, yer see."

"And will sell out to the highest bidder?" smiled Skyrowski.

"Not on yer life. Wo't would I be doin' that fer, w'en I knows it means me finish? Green bananers, yer t'ink there's somep'n left outer me brain pan, if yer t'ink that."

Billy put in this assurance rather hastily, for he saw what the other was driving at.

A moment later he realized what had been true from the first, that there had not been the shadow of a chance

of obtaining mercy from the firebugs from the moment of his capture.

"I think they left nothing out of your brain pan, as you call it, Bowery William," said Skyrowski. "You are as fly as they make them. We have not fooled you in the least. And now let me tell you something."

He paused, and again the heart of Bowery Billy sank.

"Go ahead, old Sky-high-sky!" he said, with a brave attempt to appear unconcerned.

"You haven't fooled us!"

"Nobody said I'd tried ter fool yer."

"You have tried. I have no doubt but Buffington hired you to spy on us, but I doubt if you could be bribed or scared into going back on your agreement with him. You'd promise all right, but what would hold you to it after you were free of me? Bah! What is a promise, anyway? I would make a million promises to gain an end, with no intention of making them good, as Buffington would do. He made me promises. He tried to fool me. He thought I was ignorant, like his other lackeys. He little dreamed that I was studying night and day, and that I became a better scholar than he ever dreamed of being. But why should I tell you this? Just to show you that I'm not easily hoodwinked, that is all. Now, I shall depend upon none of your promises. You would break them, and the whole police department of the city would be on my track before night if I were to let you go."

Billy shut his lips hard.

"If yer won't take me promises den there ain't no use of makin' any!" he said.

"Not the least use. So keep your conscience clear, for you will feel better at the wind-up, which will come pretty soon. Gross!"

The man spoke to his companion, and for the first time Billy heard the name of the man whom he supposed to be the father of Brigitte.

"Yah," returned the other, in a thick voice.

"We will take the lad to the shop of old Busch at once. There is no telling whether he spoke the truth or not when he said that he had not reported the results of his spying this morning. This place may even now be under the eye of the police, although I don't think that. But if he should fail to return when they expect him they would look for him here, and then he would stand a good chance of being set at liberty. That shall never be. We will take him to the old secondhand shop, which this night

goes up in flame and smoke. Bowery William shall be cremated!"

"Great bumbleshutes!" gasped Billy.

But he would give no other exhibition of his consternation.

He felt that there was hardly the shadow of a hope of escape or rescue.

It is true that a picture of the face of Brigitte, the beautiful Jewess, came up before his mental vision. But at the same time he remembered that he owed his present predicament to what he believed to be her treachery.

Why, then, should he anticipate help from her?

In the faces of the two firebugs he saw no hope of mercy.

"We'll have to gag you again, so, if you have anything more to say, now's your chance—maybe your last one," said Skyrowski.

"Yer goin' ter burn me up in Busch's old shop?" exclaimed Billy.

"That is the program. You might as well know, so as to have time to repent."

"Ain't yer goin' to give me any show?"

"No."

"All right—I ain't no beggar. Go ahead wit' yer murderous work. I'll die game, betcher life, old Sky-high-sky, and der time'll come w'en yer'll git yer finish ter pay fer dis piece of work—see?"

Skyrowski took up the handkerchief with which he had gagged Billy before and proceeded to bind it tightly over the mouth of the Bowery lad.

"Now, Gross, we'll get him across the court into the basement on the other side. We'll leave him there until night, when we finish up the business. Night or day, it is safe for us to work here."

Skyrowski said this to his companion.

Still the latter was silent; but it was clear that he understood English, as he proceeded to do his part in carrying out the instructions of his partner.

They took Bowery Billy up between them, although either of them might have lifted him easily alone.

They bore him to the opposite side of the room and laid him on the floor. Then Skyrowski brushed aside a blanket, which took the place of a rug, disclosing a trapdoor, fastened by a lock.

With a key from his pocket the firebug unlocked the trapdoor and raised it.

A flight of steep stairs was disclosed.

They led down into what was probably a basement or cellar.

The two men bore Bowery Billy down these stairs, and at the bottom they took a lantern from a nail and Gross led the way with this while the other carried their prisoner along a narrow passage which seemed to Bowery Billy to be half a mile in length, but which in reality was probably not more than a hundred yards long.

The Bowery lad was then left lying on the ground behind some empty boxes.

For several hours he remained there absolutely helpless, the time dragging so slowly that it seemed as if he must become mad.

He strained at his bonds in vain, and until he became exhausted. At the same time he was tortured with hunger and thirst.

At last Skyrowski, accompanied by Gross and the third member of the gang, came into the dark cellar, and one of them lifted Bowery Billy and carried him up a short flight of stairs.

And presently the bootblack was placed against a supporting beam, to which he was securely bound. The place seemed to be the rear part of a cheap shop filled with secondhand goods.

It was not lighted at all except by the lantern which Gross had brought up the stairs.

The third of the russians at this moment brought out a can of kerosene, while Gross heaped together a lot of paper and waste, which seemed to have been left handy for that very purpose.

Over these combustibles the kerosene was sprinkled copiously.

Bowery Billy observed the preparations with a strange feeling of indifference. He knew that it meant death to himself, and a horrible death at that. But he could not lift a hand to save himself, and he no longer entertained the shadow of a hope that anyone else would come to his rescue.

The operations had for him a singular fascination, and he observed them as if they had nothing whatever to do with him.

Skyrowski stood to one side and watched the face of his prisoner. He seemed to be waiting for the boy to give vent to a smothered wail for mercy.

Perhaps he thought that the imminence of death would compel the boy to beg for a chance to save himself by the making of some disclosures.

At last Skyrowski approached the boy and said:

"You see what is going to be done. In an hour the walls of this old building will crumble in ruins. Have you any revelations to make?"

Billy could not speak, and he made no sign to imply that he had anything to say.

"Well, then, Gross, touch off the stuff with the light from the lantern, and be ready to skip out as soon as it blazes up. We'll have to get out rather lively."

Then he turned back to his prisoner.

"Say good-by, Bowery William," laughed Skyrowski, the firebug, "for you're going up in smoke. There's such a thing as a boy knowing too much!"

As Skyrowski spoke, Gross touched the blaze from the lantern to the combustibles, and instantly a red tongue of flame leaped up!

CHAPTER VI.

FRIEND OR FOE?—THE QUESTION ANSWERED.

Bowery Billy stood with his eyes fixed on the heap of inflammable material unable to stir hand or foot, or to utter an outcry.

When the flames flared up, and a breath of heat was wafted to his face, he was aroused from the sort of apathy into which he had fallen. He saw Gross and the third of the firebugs make a dash for the stairway that led to the basement, by way of which they could escape to the next building on the other side of the alley.

Skyrowski lingered only long enough to make sure that the fire had taken a sure hold on the combustibles.

Then, with one more triumphant glance at the face of Bowery Billy, he turned his back upon his victim and followed his partners.

Up leaped the flames with a soft crackling sound. There was but little smoke, for the fire burned too freely to make any. Some wooden boxes near at hand were the first articles of substance to fall into the embrace of the devouring flames.

These flashed up like tinder, and the heat increased.

"It won't last long!" was the thought of Bowery Billy. "And nobody'll ever know fer sure wot become of poor Billy o' der Bowery. Myrick will wonder, and so will Lulu Drexel, the queer young chap from up country, that seems ter t'ink I'm all right. There's some others. But if dis shebang burns down they won't find enough of my cinders ter make out if it's me or der office cat dat got creniated. Aw, der tough luck, ter peg out in

dis miser'ble way, wit'out even a show ter say good-by ter me friends!

"Dat ain't der worst of it, by cripes! Ter t'ink dat Brigitti, de pretty Jewess, should decoy me ter dis miser'ble death! Fer she's ter blame fer my fallin' inter der trap. Dat Skyrowski never could 'a' fooled me in any other way. He wasn't sharp enough. It takes a friend ter do der meanest t'ings by a man, by cripes! Aw, green bananers!"

Such were the bitter thoughts that flitted through the brain of Bowery Billy as he saw the red flames leaping higher and higher—saw them licking up the kerosene-saturated kindlings—saw them reach out for the wooden boxes—saw them nibbling at the shelves, and suddenly darting at the parcels with which they were laden.

He saw them eating into the floor, and creeping toward him with cunning stealth. They seemed to crawl to each side of hirh, as if they were scheming to surround him, and then, with a crackling laugh of cruel glee, to catch him up in their blistering embrace!

It was strange how the fire fiends seemed to carry out the scheme of vengeance just as Skyrowski would have delighted in seeing them do, had he been on hand to witness their advance.

The heat was growing intense.

It was no longer easy to breathe the stifling air.

"Naw, dis can't last long!" thought Billy.

He kept working his jaw all the while, partly to free his mouth from the handkerchief, that he might breathe easier.

Presently the gag slipped off.

His lips—his voice—his tongue—were free!

"Help!"

The single cry sounded above the louder crackle of the flames, which were now leaping up the nearest wall of the room.

"Help!"

Louder rang the shout, now risen to a yell, that seemed to quiver with the vibrations of the flames.

"Fire! fire!"

It was so that Bowery Billy varied his cries—first, for help, and then the alarm cry of fire.

He heard a sound that did not seem like the rustle of the flames, or the cracking of the wooden walls as they warped with the heat.

He tried to change his position. The smoke was set-

tling about him, and his eyes were smarting so that he could hardly hold them open.

He strained at his bonds. Suddenly—he could scarce believe it—they yielded. His arms were free, then his legs.

He thought that he had broken the ropes. He did not stop to wonder at it then, any more than he would have done at a miraculous event in a dream.

He plunged toward the stairs by which his captors had fled.

He did not think that it was taking him directly back into the power of his enemies.

His only impulse was to escape from the blistering, suffocating heat of the fire.

But, before he could reach the stairs, a pair of hands caught at his legs and drew him the other way.

"Come!" commanded a choking voice. "The door! Follow—me!"

Then, straining open his eyes, he saw a form crouching at his feet.

A face was uplifted so that he could see it by the red light from the fire.

"Brigitti!" he gasped.

"Yes. Come—to the door. I can unfasten it—on the inside!"

She pulled him down at her side. Together they crawled toward the front part of the little shop, he guided by one of her hands against his shoulder.

They reached the door. There the heat was not so great nor the smoke so stifling.

Brigitti fumbled with the night lock, which was all that made the door secure. Billy sprang to his feet. key was found and turned, and together they flung wide the door.

A cool rush of air brought them strength; and it likewise fanned the flames within, and they began to roar as they raced up the walls, and leaped for inflammable articles in every part of the storeroom.

"Free!" breathed Brigitti, as they sprang out through the doorway onto the sidewalk.

The street was filled with people, and now there were several who saw the flames within the old secondhand store.

The voice of Bowery Billy was the first to give the alarm, and instantly there was a rush to the nearest box to ring for the department.

But Bowery Billy did not wait to see that this was done.

With his hand holding tight to the arm of Brigitti he ran swiftly and silently out of that street into another which was stiller.

Then, as they paused for breath in a vacant doorway, Bowery Billy put his arm around Brigitti's neck and kissed her on the cheek.

"No!" she whispered, and tried to slip away from him.

He would not let her go. But he said, his voice sounding different from what it usually did:

"I had ter, jest once, Brigitti, because yer saved my life, and I owed yer somep'n fer misjudgin' yer!"

"Misjudging me?" she repeated.

"Sure t'ing, Brigitti."

"How?"

"I t'ought yer decoyed me inter der trap fer old Skyrowski, and dat yer was ter blame fer my bein' in dat awful fix."

"I don't wonder at it, if they told you no different," said Brigitti.

"I don't understand it yet."

"You don't understand what?"

"Why yer coaxed me back to that house, and den deserted me w'en Skyrowski pounced onto me."

"I asked you to come because I had something important to tell you, and to show you also, as I said."

"What was it?"

"My father came in, seeming to be in great distress. He said that he feared he was going to die, and he was afraid to because of something that was on his mind. He flung himself onto his bed, writhing and groaning.

"I thought of you, and the questions you put to me. I thought he was really ill, and that it might be that he was ready to reveal certain matters which he had always kept secret from me as far as he could, although I have suspected many things for a long while."

"Wot is it?" Billy eagerly asked.

"That he belonged to a gang of firebugs, and that they have not only set fires for certain dishonest owners of buildings who wished to get insurance, but also others for the purpose of depriving some of the rich whom they envy the comfort and pleasure to be gained through their possessions.

"Skyrowski is an anarchist, or he is ambitious to pose as one. As I was saying, I thought my father was really in a bad way, and I knew that if he were to confess anything you would give much to listen to what he might have to tell."

"And where was Skyrowski all dis time?"

"I thought he and his companions had gone to another part of the city. I had no idea that any of them were about the premises."

"So you came after me t'inkin' that yer'd do me a good turn, instead of a bad one?"

"Yes. And I also wished to please my father."

"Yer didn't t'ink dey was layin' fer me?"

"I didn't dream of such a thing."

"Jest as soon as we got to der house, and while yer was wit' me dey jumped on me. And erbout dat time yer skinned out."

Bowery Billy's life had been saved by Brigitti, and yet he could not bear to have any question as to her faithfulness to him left in his mind.

It occurred to him that she might, after all, have been induced or compelled by her father to attempt to decoy him to the house, but with the assurance that no harm would be done to him.

Then, finding that there was a plot to kill him, she might have repented of the part she had taken in the matter, and so exerted herself to undo the work which she had been hoodwinked into doing.

He wanted to be sure whether or not she had, even in a slight degree, played a deception against him.

As he spoke last she fixed her dark eyes reproachfully upon his face.

"You suspect that I have not told you the whole truth, Bowery Billy?" she asked.

"I jest wanted ter know, dat's all."

"I have told you the truth. When they sprang upon you I knew that there was treachery. But I could not have helped you by remaining, and if I had shown them that I would help you they would have made it impossible for me to do so. But I suppose you will distrust me, whatever I may say or do. It is always the way with a poor Jewess!"

"Aw, come off, Brigitti! Yer der real t'ing, and I knows it!"

And looking into his eyes, Brigitti knew that he spoke as he believed.

CHAPTER VII.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

As has been stated, they were in a street a little way from East Broadway, where it was much quieter than in

the thoroughfare named. Indeed, although the hour was not late, there were very few persons stirring.

The workers who lived in the street were eating their evening meal, or, in many cases, going to bed. The regular traffic of the day, never great in that street, had ceased altogether.

From that point they could hear the sounds of the fire detachment, called to the fire which Skyrowski and his companions had kindled.

Bowery Billy was strongly impelled to run to see if they succeeded in saving the old building from destruction. The watching of a fire, with the fight made to prevent its spreading, had a fascination for him, as it has for every boy. Besides, he had a special interest in the outcome of this particular conflagration.

But he remembered his companion.

It suddenly occurred to him, that, in saving him from the plot of Skyrowski, and in which her father, called Gross, was an accomplice, she had taken a great risk upon herself.

Should it be discovered that she had had a hand in thwarting the plans of her father and the other firebugs, what would be the consequences to her?

Had she not, by her brave act, made herself an outcast among those from whom she had a right to expect protection and friendship?

Billy wondered if she had thought of this.

He noticed that she stood close to him, with her hand on his arm, and that she showed no inclination to go back to the home from which she had stolen to perform her mission.

There was quite a long interval of silence between them while they both listened to the muffled sounds from the scene of the conflagration.

As there seemed to be no great excitement in the vicinity, they judged that the fire had not reached great proportions. Probably it would be confined to the building in which it was started.

It was even likely that the alarm had been given in season to prevent the total destruction of that building, tinder box though it was.

If that were the case, then Skyrowski would be informed of the escape of Bowery Billy.

There could be no doubt but that the anarchist leader would be on the watch, and that he would know as soon as anyone the results of his attempt.

Billy of the Bowery rapidly ran over in his mind all the phases of the situation.

He looked again at the face of Brigitti.

He surprised her dark eyes fixed upon his face with a strange intentness.

"Say, Brigitti, wot yer t'inkin' erbout?" he asked.

"I was wondering what I had better do," said the girl.

"Yer don't dast ter go back to der crib where I was ketched?"

"No. At least not until—"

"Until what?"

"I know if they suspect me of rescuing you."

"Yer t'inks dey'll know dat I wasn't cremated?"

"Skyrowski will make sure. He will be in the midst of the crowd at the fire, and he will know if you escaped. He will find a way to make sure. No one can ever deceive him."

"And if he finds out dat I took a sneak dere'll be somep'n doin'!"

"Yes."

"Yer knows him, Brigitti. If I'm free, won't he be scared of my tellin' der cops of how he tried ter do me, and so be for gettin' outer de way erbout as lively as he can?"

"He will keep himself hidden, or disguised, and watch for a chance to catch you again. He will have others on the lookout for you. Your life is not safe, Bowery Billy, while Skyrowski is alive and at large."

"Green bananers!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Jest ter let off steam. It's a way I has, and yer'll have ter git used to it."

"You had better leave this part of the city, and not return until Skyrowski has been arrested. You are not safe here for a moment."

"Great bumbleshutes! But dat's a comfortin' t'ought—dat I ain't sure of me neck fer a single minute. But I ain't worryin', Brigitti—at least, not erbout that. Wot I'm t'inkin' of is, wot'll you be doin'? Yer'll be s'pected if yer goes back, don't yer t'ink?"

"Yes."

"And old Skyrowski'll be ugly as sin. He'll be fer killin' yer!"

"Yes."

"How erbout yer old man? Wot'll he fer dat other jay smash yer?"

Brigitti sighed.

"My father is weak," she said.

"He picked me up wit'out any help. And I ain't a feather weight."

"That isn't what I mean."

"Dat he's weak in der nut, den?"

"Yes, in his mind and will. He is ruled by Skyrowski. Whatever Skyrowski may command, my father will do."

"Aw, but he's easy, den. I'd hate ter be like dat. I'm jest der other way—see? Wot dey tells me ter do I wouldn't do. I'm back-action, like a Chinese pig. Eh—green bananers!"

This last exclamation was called forth by the appearance of two skulking forms in the narrow street where Bowery Billy and his companion were standing.

The forms came from the direction of East Broadway.

One was tall, with bent shoulders—a peculiar form that Billy was sure he recognized.

Indeed, he had the best of reason for having every peculiarity of that figure photographed on his memory.

"Skyrowski!" he breathed.

"And my father!" whispered Brigitte.

She clung to the arm of her companion—she pulled hard to draw him further within the shadows.

For himself Bowery Billy was not alarmed. Out in the open street he had no fear but that he could take care of himself in flight, if not in a fight.

But with Brigitte it was different.

He might go where she could not.

And, even if she had not saved his life at the risk of her own, he would have stood by her in the present peril just the same.

There was no chance for flight from the doorway where they were concealed then without almost a certainty of being observed by the eagle-eyed enemy, who was undoubtedly looking for them at that moment.

"He's found out dat I didn't stay in der crib ter sizzle," whispered Bowery Billy.

"Yes, he knows that you escaped. He probably suspects that you gave the alarm that called the department in time to save the building from destruction."

"Aw, he smells der whole rat. He's a fox, he is. Say, if he got his flippers on to my t'roat erbout dis time he wouldn't do a t'ing, would he?"

Brigitte clutched the arm of Billy more tightly, for the two firebugs had come to a halt on the opposite side of the narrow street, and so close that the faint rumble of their voices could be heard.

"I don't want 'em ter git their eyes on you, Brigitte!" said Billy, in sudden alarm.

He turned and tried the door at his back.

To his surprise it opened, and in an instant the boy had dodged across the threshold.

He drew Brigitte in after him.

Closing the door softly, he felt for a bolt or key on the inner side.

There was none, and he realized that the place was by no means secure against pursuit, and that at the same time there was a good chance of being ordered out by some of the inmates of the house.

For, once within, they could hear the murmur of voices above and about them, indicating that the building swarmed with tenants.

"Dis ain't no place fer us!" whispered Billy. "But we can stay here, maybe, till dem blokes gits outer der way. Den I'm fer making tracks back to der Bowery. I has friends there."

"We are safe nowhere from Skyrowski!" returned Brigitte.

"Old Skyrowski ain't howlin' safe himself erbout dis time. I has der cops onter him before many hours if I once gits der chance ter send in der signal."

They waited in silence for ten minutes before Bowery Billy ventured to open the door and look up and down the narrow street.

When he did this he directed his companion to remain within until he was assured that the coast was clear.

A careful scanning of the street showed him no signs of the enemy.

"They've gone on, I reckon," said Billy. "Now we makes a break fer a street where dere's more light. We makes fer der Bowery."

With the arm of Brigitte linked within his own, the young street Arab sallied forth once more, and they hurried out of the dark street where they had sought refuge.

Suddenly they became aware of the sounds of running footsteps in pursuit.

They were close in their rear, and a backward glance showed them a tall form racing along the street directly toward them.

"It is he—Skyrowski!" gasped Brigitte.

Before Bowery Billy could divine her intention, she had broken away from him and was running with the fleetness of a hare toward the lighter street a little further on.

Billy could do only one thing, and that was to follow the girl. This he did, as fast as he could run, although he found that her pace was a hard one to match.

Skyrowski, with his long legs, was gaining on them.

He advanced with leaps and bounds, desperate in his endeavor to prevent the final escape of one who held such dangerous evidence against him.

It was a race for life with the Polish firebug, no less than it was for Billy, of the Bowery, and he realized it.

How he had followed Bowery Billy and his companion almost straight to the spot of their temporary concealment was a mystery which it would have been hard to explain.

Bowery Billy came up with Brigitti just as the latter reached the broader and better-lighted street.

At the same time the foremost of their pursuers was so close to them that they could see his face.

For the firebug was straining every nerve, and he seemed to be absolutely reckless as to the results of being seen.

In the lighter street were numberless fruit and vegetable carts drawn up along the curbing.

Dark-faced men and bareheaded women crouched in doorways, and some of them reclined, half asleep, in the carts.

It was the Italian quarter. Some of the saloons were still open, places where they served big glasses of the dregs of beer barrels for three cents apiece.

In front of these saloons three Italians squatted, one of them thrumming on an old guitar and singing a somewhat doleful but not unmusical air in his own tongue.

As Billy and his companion ran into the street the comrades of the player joined their voices with his, and a weird, sweet sort of melody was the result.

"Come, Brigitti—dem chaps are better den nutting!" said Bowery Billy.

And he made straight for the doorway where the musicians were sitting.

A backward glance showed them that their leading pursuer had slackened his headlong pace.

Billy half led, half dragged his companion into the midst of the knot of Italians huddled in front of the saloon.

"Now let Skyrowski try fer takin' us, and I stirs up a hornets' nest!" exclaimed Bowery Billy.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIX-UP WITH THE DAGOS.

The Italian singers leaped up and the one with the guitar uttered a guttural exclamation as Billy and Brigitti appeared in their midst.

He began to jabber in his own tongue, addressing his remarks to Bowery Billy, evidently with the expectation that he would be understood.

Probably he thought that Brigitti, with her dark complexion, was one of his own people.

"Aw, cut out der Dago talk!" exclaimed Billy. "We can't go der lingo. Talk United States and we're wit' yer."

The men shrugged their shoulders and looked at each other inquiringly. Then the one with the guitar said:

"What-a you want-a, eh?"

"See dat tall, crook-necked jay comin' dis way?" queried Billy, pointing toward Skyrowski, who was still advancing, but at a somewhat more cautious pace.

"Yes, signor. What-a he want-a?"

"Yer wants ter t'row him down if he tries any funny business round here. Yer see, he ain't jest right in der nut—wot yer call crazy—see?"

The Italians, working under English-speaking bosses, and having been in this country for some time, could understand English even better than they could speak it. They were used to the vernacular of the streets, for their own boys blacked shoes and peddled newspapers.

They had seen Bowery Billy before, although they probably did not know his name. They knew that he had a bootblack's stand near the Bowery.

But Skyrowski, who was coming down upon them with fierce aspect, they did not know.

He certainly looked "crazy," as Bowery Billy had suggested. The Italian with the guitar had been drinking enough of the three-cent schooners of beer in one of the nearby saloons to make him reckless.

He felt like singing or fighting—and he didn't care a rap which he did.

Billy's shrewd perceptions had sized the fellow up about right.

He exchanged a few words with his companions as Skyrowski approached.

Brigitti clung to the arm of Bowery Billy. She could see another figure creeping along behind the Polish firebug, and she knew that it was her father.

She could not understand what Bowery Billy expected to do.

Even if there had been a policeman at hand, she would not have dared to appeal to him for protection.

If her father had come along the officer would undoubtedly have swallowed the man's statement and compelled the girl to go back home with him.

"Billy, that is my father coming!" Brigitte whispered.

"Let him come!" said the Bowery lad.

"He will force me to go back with him."

"Aw, but he'll have a picnic makin' yer go wit' him less yer wants ter."

"But Skyrowski—"

"Sky-high-ski'll git it in der neck, where der chicken got der ax."

The careless assurance of Bowery Billy gave Brigitte a sense of confidence, even though she could see no grounds for it.

At this moment the firebugs reached the curbing, quite close to where the fugitives stood in the midst of the group of Italians.

Others began to gather around them, their curiosity excited. The black eyes that were fixed upon Skyrowski and Gross were not friendly, as Bowery Billy could easily observe.

"Keep cool, Brigitte," enjoined Billy. "I'm goin' ter start a mix-up fer the Dagoes and Sheenies, and w'en it 'gits good and hot me and you lights out—see? Green bananas! But we has der luck—everyt'ing is goin' our way. It'll be a cinch. Mind how der Dagoes are rubbin'! Aw, but it'll be great w'en dey git ter scrappin'!"

Billy professed to be a great believer in luck.

When things were going his way, he believed that he was born under a lucky star. When everything seemed to be against him, as was sometimes the case, then he felt that the stars had a grudge against him and that there was no use of trying to butt against ill fortune.

Just now he was far from being despondent.

Skyrowski had his eyes on Bowery Billy.

If he had had any doubts until then about the escape of the boy whom he had tried to cremate, those doubts were dispelled.

The face of the firebug would have been a study.

The expression was one of fiendishness, and at the same time he was held in check by the crowd of Italians, who might not take kindly to an attempt to do violence to

the Bowery bootblack who seemed to expect them to be friendly.

"Come here, my son!" cried Skyrowski, who had evidently decided upon the sort of bluff he was to try to work off.

"You see he's nutty!" said Billy, winking at the guitar player.

"You get-a 'way!" growled the big Italian to whom the boy had addressed the remark.

And he swung the guitar threateningly at the firebug.

"It is my son, and he has run away from his home! And he has stolen my money. He is a bad boy. The girl is this man's daughter, and the boy has taken her away with him. They will not go back till I make them. You will let us seize them."

Skyrowski's story was not a very improbable one on the face of it, and there seemed to be just a chance that the Italians might believe it.

If they did so, then they would be likely to aid the firebugs in seizing the fugitives instead of protecting the latter.

Brigitte was breathless with anxiety.

But Billy kept up the show of confidence.

"Aw, wot a lie!" he fairly howled.

Then he turned to the guitar player and thrust his face up close to that of the Italian.

"Say, does I look like dat bloke?" he demanded.

"No-a, you not look-a like heem."

"'Cause if I does, I goes and has me face changed, see! I doesn't go in der same class wit' him. I tell yer, he's nutty, and he has a likin' fer settin' buildin's afire. Yer wants ter run 'im outer der street, and give him over to der cops. Dey're wantin' of him worse den a baby wants its mummer."

A hoarse roar of rage broke from the lips of Skyrowski.

If he had kept cool, he might have had a fair show of convincing the Italians, so that they would have at least allowed him to take the fugitives, even though they might not have aided him in doing so.

But now, as he began to rave and swing his arms in fury, it turned the tide of feeling the other way.

He advanced with the evident determination of pouncing upon Bowery Billy.

"Look out, or he breaks some o' yer faces!" warned Billy, retreating to the doorway and drawing Brigitte along with him.

"Get-a 'way!" howled the guitar player.

The command was taken up and repeated on all sides. A dozen dark-skinned sons of Italy closed in about Skyrowski and Gross.

The latter, more scared than ugly, lost his head.

He made a forward rush to seize Brigitti, who screamed with terror.

Chug!—went a Dago fist plumb between the eyes of Gross.

He went down like a shot, and the next moment was kicking and yelling, with as many of the Italians on top of him as there was room for.

Skyrowski did not care particularly for the troubles of his comrade.

It was taking the attention of the crowd, and he seized the supposed opportunity to make a dash for Bowery Billy.

He had something like a club or slingshot in his hand, and if he could have dealt the blow that was aimed at the head of Bowery Billy it would have ended everything for the latter at the time.

And, if a murder had been committed in their midst, it is doubtful if the Italians would have betrayed the murderer, as there was a good chance of their being drawn into the trouble.

More than one dark crime was committed in that quarter, and it was not for their interest to encourage the police in coming there for clews.

Billy knew this. He knew just about how much help he might calculate upon getting from the Italians, and he was foxy when it came to working them for that much.

He nimbly dodged the blow that might have killed him, He sprang from the doorway, dragging the girl after him.

At the same time the guitar player dropped his instrument and something flashed in his hand—a thing of steel, that caught and reflected the light that shone from a distant arc lamp.

Skyrowski caught the gleam of the weapon and wheeled with lightning swiftness.

But he was not quick enough to avoid a hurried slash that jabbed the meaty part of his arm just below the shoulder.

It was not a deep cut, but it told him what he might expect, and his only show was to close with the guitar player and wrestle for a temporary victory.

Both were powerful men. The others stepped back instead of taking a hand in the fight.

The guitar player was evidently a king pin among them,

and his followers would not interfere with his fight unless he asked them to.

Then the pair seemed to be quite evenly matched, and the crowd was not averse to watching a good fight, knowing that the tables could be turned against the intruder whenever it should seem expedient to do so.

"Now—now we may get away from here! We may escape!" whispered Brigitti.

"And not see der end of der scrap? Aw, dat'll be tough!" said Billy.

"But it may be the best chance that will come."

"Dey's all der chances in der world. Don't yer see dat luck is goin' our way? Green bananers! But dat's der gamiest scrap I've seen since I was a kid! It's great! Aw, but Skyrowski ain't in it wit' der Dago, arter all. But—say—der Sheeny is keepin' der other chap busy, though! Der Dago has lost his knife—it's on der ground—and dat makes der scrap more even. By cripes, see 'em go it!"

Bowery Billy was wild with delight. Brigitti was pale and breathless. She could not have dragged her companion away from the spot, and she knew there was no use in trying. Billy, of the Bowery, did not mind taking a few more chances for the sake of witnessing a fight that would have sold standing room at a prize exhibition in a ring.

Neither Skyrowski nor the Dago possessed even the rudiments of science. But they were strong men, and after a clinch in which neither seemed to obtain the slightest advantage they broke away and swung for each other's face with fists.

There was speed from the start.

Both received some ugly cracks on the head and jaws, which stirred their passion to white heat.

Then they became more wary, and they learned something of the "noble art" by dear experience.

Skyrowski was the first to go down.

There was no one to call time, but he was up within the limit and at it again, and a moment after he sent the guitar player to the ground by a clip that would have felled an ox.

The Italian came up more slowly, and for a brief space he was, in the parlance of the ring, groggy.

But Skyrowski was not much better off, and the hit he had landed was more by luck than anything else, and they fought shy for a brief space, while both recovered their wind and sight.

Then they closed for another clinch.

"By cripes!" breathed Bowery Billy, fairly dancing with delight.

"Let's go before it ends. If Skyrowski should win—"

Thus pleaded Brigitti.

But Billy was deaf to the plea. Wild horses could not have dragged him away then.

The Italians seemed to be quite as much entertained, but they watched keenly to see that their man had fair play.

For that matter, they wanted him to have more than fair play, and had he seemed to be getting the worst of it it is certain that they would have taken a hand in the game.

Of this Bowery Billy felt sure all the while, and for that reason he was not much concerned about the outcome.

Gross, the father of Brigitti, had been roughly handled, and at last, when his assailants had let up on him, he had crawled away, staggered to his feet and made the most of the chance to escape while the crowd was entertained by the fight.

Brigitti was relieved to see that her father had not been seriously hurt in the combat.

After the treacherous part that he had played, and for other reasons which she best understood, it could not be said that she really loved her father. At the same time she did not wish him to be killed.

That he would sooner or later come to face justice in the courts of the city for the criminal part which he had been drawn into she did not doubt, and she did not much care how soon that came to pass.

"Gee!—see 'em go it!" Billy exclaimed, as the battle waxed hotter.

Just then the combatants broke away again.

Then—chug!—an awful punch in Skyrowski's stomach.

It could not have been called a foul. But it was a wicked one, and it sent him to the earth, where he curled up like a snake with its head cut off.

Nobody called "time."

It would have been of no use had anybody done so.

It did not need a referee to declare Skyrowski to be out of the game.

CHAPTER IX.

BOWERY BILLY'S HIDDEN FOE.

The next morning the hour of nine o'clock found Bowery Billy in the office of Myrick, the keen headquarters detective, who had put the bootblack ferret onto the secret service of the city.

He told the story of his spying upon the firebugs, of his capture by Skyrowski and the close call he had had from being cremated alive in the fire on East Broadway.

Myrick listened to the whole yarn, smoking silently the while, making no comment and asking no questions until Billy stopped talking of his own accord.

"I knew about the fire," Myrick then said. "I knew that it was incendiary, and I assumed that it was the work of the gang that I'm trying to round up. I wondered if you were on, Billy. Where is the girl, Brigitti?"

"Wid some decent people dat she knows. Dey'll take care of her, I'm t'inkin'."

"Probably. But Gross will get after her again unless he is too scared about running up against the police. You say he skipped after you saw Skyrowski knocked out in the fight with the Dago last night?"

"Sure t'ing. Der Dagoes would 'a' been rustlin' us outer de street if we hadn't."

"Why didn't you report the affair at the precinct station at once?"

"I told Jake, de Bowery cop, and he said he'd see ter der reportin'."

"Well, he did see to it—about an hour ago. It was telephoned over to me just before you came in."

"Jake's bum slow."

"Jake is a Bowery man. He came near losing his job once for being too faithful. That's something that you and I can't help, Billy. But it would have been better if you had reported direct to the station house."

"Wot would it have ermounted ter?"

"Nothing."

"Den w'y would it been better?"

"It would have left it up to the people at the station, instead of up to you and me, that's all. Oh, Billy, the police department of a big city is a queer mix-up, and there's a lot of push, pull, graft and red tape—things that you know mighty little about. There is no use of kickin'. I do my work, and you must do yours, and in time we'll have our reward—when we've shuffled off, probably."

Bowery Billy stared at Myrick, not quite sure what the sleuth was driving at.

He had never heard Myrick speak in just that way before.

But the detective did not offer an explanation, and the time was to come when Bowery Billy should understand just what was meant.

"Next time, Billy, if possible," added Myrick, "just report direct to the nearest station if it is at an hour when you can't get at me here. I don't want to be pulled out of bed at night short of a call from headquarters. You are to blame for nothing. But we don't know where to look for Skyrowski."

"Den dey didn't send cops ter take him last night?" Billy asked.

"No."

"Haven't dey yet?"

"Yes. If the firebug obligingly waited for them right where the Dago downed him, then they'll find him. You know the size of that chance."

"Aw, green bananers! He's took a sneak before dis."

"Of course."

"Wot'll yer do now?"

"There has got to be a still hunt, and I want you to act as the decoy. He will want to down you, Billy. He'll find a way to do it if he isn't rounded up, with his gang. He isn't the sort to skip out of the city. You got a valuable point when you found out that he had leanings toward the anarchist foolishness. That explains a lot of things that were rather mysterious. Oh, you've done a big thing, Bowery Billy. Now go back and round up the game."

Billy Barlow, of the Bowery, was thoughtful for a moment.

Myrick had not expressed the slightest anxiety about the outcome, so far as the danger to the young police spy was concerned.

"He don't seem ter t'ink dat I'm likely ter see my fin'ish if I goes buttin' inter der game ergin now," he thought.

Myrick's eyes were on the boy's face.

"It's danger that makes the fox keener than the hound," said Myrick, as if he were speaking to himself. "One fox will often get away from a whole pack of hounds with men and guns to back them up. A boy who has a cinch never gets to be a winner. The same with a man. Don't

be heedless, Billy—don't throw your life away—don't let anybody fool you—not even a pretty girl."

"Nit!" grunted Bowery Billy.

"Now pitch in. Remember what I told you about reporting. What's the matter with using the girl as a decoy? That would be a bait for old Gross, and Gross would be a bait for Skyrowski. But work out the game to suit yourself. It's a blind deal, but you have your share of the cards."

"Good-by, Billy."

Billy went out of Myrick's office without a word.

He was thinking hard and fast. He went back to his bootblack stand and worked like a tiger while the run of business lasted.

The glare and flare of artificial light illuminated the Bowery before there was much of a lull in work, and then Billy flung himself into his chair to rest and think.

"Aw der rotten luck!" he reflected.

For it no longer seemed to him that everything was going his way.

"If der cops had done their part de firebugs would be rounded up before dis. But no—dey has ter leave it, ~~and~~ I has ter run me nose inter der noose and take chances of gittin' out before the other end of der rope is jerked. And Myrick wants me ter make Brigitte play der decoy duck. Wot if I did, and she got ketched, and I got my finish? Green bananers!"

A thickset man came along at that instant and paused beside the chair.

"Gimme a shine!" he ordered.

"I've quit for der day," said Billy, after a glance at the man's face, to assure himself that it was not a regular customer, whom he never refused.

"You're particular, ain't you?" grumbled the man.

The latter was very dark, with closely curling hair and thick lips. His nose, too, was flattened, and Billy spotted him as a mulatto.

"I'm ticklar ter do erbout as I wants ter; see," said Billy.

"Gimme a shine. I'm in a hurry and shoeblocks are shy around here."

All the while the man was eying Bowery Billy in a peculiar manner, which the lad felt rather than observed with his eyes.

The street Arab climbed down out of his chair, saying:

"Dis is der fast, and I does it wit' a hustle. It costs yer double price on ercount of it bein' after hours."

"Go ahead."

"Yer shoes looks as if yer'd been walkin' in mortar and brick dust."

"Perhaps I have."

"Then yer are a hod carrier?"

"That's none of your business. Go to work."

"Nit, Sambo. I ain't doin' der nigger work fer a coon wot sets himself up like you does—see? Climb outer dat chair. Wot yer takes me fer?"

The stranger glared at Bowery Billy as if he could not believe the evidence of his eyes and ears.

The bootblack was mad—that was clear. He was not in the habit of being ordered in that fashion, and from the start the manner of the mulatto had been offensive.

He had seemed to be looking at Billy as if he wanted to be sure to know him the next time he saw him.

"Aw, yer bum-smoked Eyetalian!" continued Bowery Billy, stepping back the better to view the offensive would-be patron. "If yer t'inks yer goin' ter roost in dat chair and spoil der tone of der business fer me reg'lar customers, wot are mostly gentlemen, der yer misses yer contrack—see? I ain't runnin' coon lodgin's, not on yer tintype. Hike outer der chair, or I pushes yer face."

This was bold talk, for the man was big and burly. Besides he had an ugly look.

But Bowery Billy never thought of dimensions when he was angry.

It was not the first time that he had ordered a man out of his chair, and heretofore he had been obeyed without much delay.

But this fellow stuck. He grew darkly red under the smoky-hue of his cheeks.

"You are going to give me a shine before I get out of the chair, or I get out of it to give you a thrashing! Do ye mind!" he growled.

"Aw, thrash nutting!"

There was a brief interval of silent duel with looks or weapons.

Bowery Billy's eyes never wavered in their gaze into the black eyes of the ugly customer.

The latter had to give up on that part of the match. But he suddenly sprang from the chair and made a grab for Billy's shoulder.

Billy had a pair of arms which, as he declared, were not mates. His left was more than twice as strong as his right—indeed, it was more powerful than the best arm of most strong men.

He never said much about this gift, and he did not often display his strength. But now and then it came handy to work off a surprise on somebody who thought to handle him easily.

This seemed to be a good time to lay out the strength of that arm.

He made a swing with it and caught his assailant with a fearful clip on the jaw.

The man toppled over into the gutter and wabbled about there for half a minute before even attempting to get up.

Then he arose and stepped back to look at the thing that he had been up against.

"Aw, move on, before I gits after yer!" admonished Bowery Billy.

"I've spotted you, all right!" snarled the other, with one hand on his jaw, which was feeling as if it had been kicked by a horse.

"Sure t'ing—I'm easy ter spot if yer only der right sort of a Johnnie. If yer wants a shine waltz eround in reg'lar hours and I'll make yer shoes look like dey cost t'ree dollars in a Sheeny shop."

The other drew back his thick lips in a grin that showed his white teeth. It gave him a vicious look, and, without another word, he walked stiffly down Bayard Street.

"Say, Billy, yer laid him out good!" exclaimed a familiar voice as the stranger disappeared.

The speaker was Dan, the bully of the Bowery.

"Aw, but it was easy," said the bootblack.

"I seen him when he first come this way. He was lookin' all around as if he wanted to find somebody in particklar. Out on der Bowery he pretty near run inter me, then 'pologized, and axed me if I could d'reet him to a bootblack's stand. I looked at his shoes and den at me watch, and knew yer wouldn't want ter see him, and so told him of Jimmie's stand—you knows where dat is?"

"Sure."

"But he didn't seem satisfied. He axed me if there wasn't one right near Bayard."

"Green bananers! Wot did yer tell him?"

"Dat yer didn't do any biz after this hour."

"Wot did he do den?"

"He said he'd try fer yer if I'd tell him where yer was. He axed me if yer name wasn't Billy."

"Great bumbleshines! Say, Danny, he was layin' fer me! Wot do you t'ink?"

"Why should he be doin' that?"

"Aw, fer reasons. Didn't it look dat way?"

"I t'ought of that. But I couldn't see why he should lo it."

"He was layin' fer me. Say, Danny, do yer mind walkin' erlong wit' me and seein' if we can't shadow der coon? I wants ter see wot's in der wind."

"Sure, Billy."

"Yer wouldn't mind, if der was a scrap, lendin' me a hand, if der odds was erginst me?"

"Sure not. I'd like ter limber up me muskles a bit, ter tell the trut'. Only I don't want ter tackle a cinch."

"I knows a bloke dat yer'd like ter push fists wit'."

"Who's dat?"

"Name's Skyrowski. He's a Rooshian. Erbout seven feet tall and wit' arms like de windmills I seen down at Coney Island. Weighs erbout t'ree hundred. Gee! but I seen him in a scrap last night."

"Where was that?"

"Near East Broadway. Dago feller laid der Rooshian out. But dey was both game. It was great, Danny!"

Dan did not show so much enthusiasm.

"I was t'inkin' dis coon chap was a spy of Skyrowski's," Billy continued, while the other was silent. "The Rooshian has some hard feelin's erginst me, and der cops are layin' fer him and he's layin' fer me, I spect. Dat's why I t'ought it might be handy ter have yer erlong wit' me. Den if we got up erginst both of 'em yer could tackle der Rooshian, dat's nearer yer size dan he is mine, while I was doin' up der coon. See?"

Still Dan was silent. He lagged in his footsteps, and, suddenly looking at his watch, he said:

"Gee! But I've goter 'gagement, and I can't go with yer! Awful sorry, but I fergot it till this minute, sure as I live! Better wait till ter-morrow night. Den I'll be at liberty."

"Aw, yer don't dast! Danny, yer nerve ain't no good!" jeered Bowery Billy.

But Dan would not be taunted into facing the giant "Rooshian."

The Bowery Boy ferret went on his dangerous mission alone.

CHAPTER X.

CONCLUSION.

Bowery Billy had not gone far before he caught sight of the mulatto who had seemed to be a spotter acting in the service of a secret foe of the bootblack.

Bowery Billy, from that moment, acted with the greatest caution, perhaps, that he had ever used during his brief career as a detective's assistant.

It was not that he did not want to be caught—at least, that was not the uppermost reason for his circumspection.

He wanted to follow the stranger to the hiding place of Skyrowski, if it were true that they had anything to do with each other.

He knew that the police were watching the old haunts of the firebugs.

He had been told that one of the gang had been caught already, but that he could give no information about the hiding place of the leader.

"Luck's goin' my way ergin," thought Bowery Billy, as he dodged from shadow to shadow on the track of the negro.

"Skyrowski is layin' fer me, and he sends out dis chapter make sure I ain't took a sneak and gone outer der reg'lar biz. Now der coon goes back ter report. I fol-lers, and Skyrowski is located. Den I reports to head-quarters. Der Rooshian is ketched. Aw, but it's a cinch—if it only works."

Billy was not quite so confident as his reflections would have seemed to indicate.

Well did he know that it was not a "cinch," as he expressed it.

Then, he was on the lookout for treachery.

It was a longer chase than he anticipated.

He was led nearly over to the water front on the East Side before he at last saw the negro joined by a bent lame, old-looking man, who slunk out of an alley.

The twain consulted for a minute or two, and then both made their way toward the docks.

Billy followed at what he believed to be a safe distance.

Suddenly he became aware that the negro was no longer with the old man, whom Billy suspected to be in disguise.

At the same time another old man, shorter than the first, appeared close behind Bowery Billy.

The heart of the latter beat quick with excitement.

He looked about him to see if there were any likely citizens or policemen.

"I'm t'inkin' I'm spotted, after all!" was his thought. It was not a comfortable reflection.

A less plucky fellow would have made tracks for safer

quarters. But he thought of Myrick and the explicit orders he had received from the detective.

"He don't expect me ter fall down jest because there's danger," was his thought. "He expects me ter keep straight erhead, but ter be careful. Dat's wot he says. I jollers der old man, ter see where he goes. Den I reports. Der old man is Skyrowski. And der other old man, wot is behind me, is Gross, der father of Brigitti. Aw, but I knows him all right. He's easy. But de Rooshian has a good make-up. But fer der coon bein' wit' him, and his bein' so tall, I wouldn't git onter him."

Billy began to whistle cheerfully and kept ahead, without appearing to be looking for anybody.

He made as if he were going past the dock where, at that moment, the one he had spotted as Skyrowski disappeared.

"He hides under dat dock," was Billy's verdict.

Just then he heard rapidly approaching footsteps.

Four men, who looked like dock hands, were running in ahead of Bowery Billy.

The heart of the latter leaped.

"Dey're goin' ter cut me off!" he breathed.

He paused, looking to see if there was a way of escape open.

The one whom he thought was Gross, the father of Brigitti, and one of the firebugs, came running up.

He placed a hand on the shoulder of Bowery Billy.

The latter wheeled and attempted to land a crack on the man's face.

But the blow was easily parried and his wrists were caught in a firm grip.

Bowery Billy might have twisted that strong left arm of his free, strong as were the hands of his assailant; but, as he looked into the man's eyes, he ceased to resist. For, at the same time, the man spoke.

"Take care, Bowery Billy—it's Myrick!" said the man.

"Great bumbleshutes!" gasped Billy.

"No time now for words. With four picked men I have watched you all day. I knew you would lead us to the game. Come, and we'll be in at the finish!"

Bowery Billy thought that he must be dreaming.

But he had the presence of mind to obey his chief, and together they ran out upon the old dock, where they found two of the plain-clothes men, whom Billy had thought the pals of Skyrowski, tussling with the bent, old man, whom Billy had shadowed so successfully.

Crack! sounded a revolver shot, and one of the officers fell.

Billy and Myrick ran up, and the latter got a hand upon the disguised firebug.

The struggle was by no means over.

Skyrowski was disarmed, but he fought like a demon.

He knocked down two of the officers, and for a moment it looked as if he would break away and leap off the pier.

But Myrick's skill turned the tables.

Even Bowery Billy managed to get in what he called a "wipe" with his fearful left, which helped to make the desperate man weaken.

A moment more and Skyrowski, the firebug, was landed, and his wrists were manacled.

Myrick took him in charge, and the other officers made a search of the dock for the man's pals.

They found Gross—that was all. He surrendered easily, for he had not the nerve to make a fight when he found that his chief was in the toils.

Later, at the trial of Skyrowski and Gross, it was learned that there were fully a dozen in the gang, but that the others were in another part of the city.

It was learned later that the other members of the gang fled from New York as soon as they knew that their nervy chief was captured.

He was really an anarchist, and a born leader.

He showed defiance at the trial. He laughed when sentence was finally pronounced against him, although that sentence was for twenty years.

Gross was given a shorter sentence, but it was enough to relieve Brigitti of further fear from him.

Meanwhile, after the exciting capture of the firebugs, Bowery Billy went back to the headquarters office with Myrick.

The latter removed the disguise—something which he seldom donned for any purpose whatever.

Then he returned to talk to Bowery Billy, whom he knew would be waiting for a word.

"You see, Billy Barlow," he said, "I wanted to make sure of the game, and I knew that you would lead me to it just like a ferret."

"And so yer fixed up a lot of officers, and, wit' yerself, come erlong ter butt in," said Billy.

"Yes. I worked on the theory that Skyrowski would seek revenge on you to begin with. He is of that sort. I knew he would put spies on to you. I knew that if you

went poking around to find him, some of his spies would follow you. Then the spies would betray the chief of the gang.

"Of course I expected that we might have to fool around two or three days before anything would come of it. But we were luckier than that."

"W'y didn't yer give me a tip of wot yer meant ter do?"

"Because you wouldn't have worked the same as if you thought you were alone. Isn't that so?"

"Sure t'ing."

"You didn't suspect there was aid near?"

"Course I didn't."

"You didn't even know me when I came up to you?"

"Not till yer spoke and looked inter my eyes. Den I knowed yer."

"Now, Billy, you probably think that I have taken the glory of this capture all from you. But let me tell you that if you hadn't had the nerve and the shrewdness to follow that fellow who came to you for a shine, we might have been a much longer time getting onto the trail of the chief of the firebugs."

"Aw, dat was nutting!"

"It was everything. Now I want to say another word to you."

"Green bananers!" muttered Bowery Billy, who thought there was a lecture coming. "Wot is it?" he asked aloud.

"You talk like a Hottentot—do you know it?"

"I never learned der languidge of der Hottentots, by cripes!"

"No, nor the English language, either."

"Wot yer mean?"

"Why don't you learn to speak decently. You have time enough to study books a bit. Sometime you'll want to cut out the Bowery business and go into better society. You are making a lot of money, with your detective work for me. Put some of it, and some of your time, into study. I'll see that you have somebody to help you."

"Green bananers! Yer wants ter make me inter a swell!"

"Not a bit of it, Billy. I want you to come up to the measure that you were intended for."

"Aw, but I can read. I reads er lot of books erbout Buffaler Bill and dem blokes."

"That is better than nothing. Yes, it is better to read anything that is clean than never to read. But I want you to learn more than that. I want you to learn to speak decent English. You know that you don't."

"Aw, but I talks ernough."

"That's right. And I like to hear you. I don't want to make you any less witty and original, and that is one reason why I hesitated about speaking of this matter to

you. I was afraid I might spoil what you are without making anything better out of you."

Billy was silent.

He knew that his language was uncouth, as well as his manners. There were times when he wished that he might appear more like a gentleman.

But it was hard to make a start. And then he hated to think of himself as like some of the prigs whom he had seen.

"I won't say any more about it now, Billy," said Myrick, kindly. "You have done me a great service. You are working up. I don't know what the end will be. Just think about what I have suggested, will you?"

"Sure t'ing. But I doesn't want ter be a dood."

"No danger."

"I'll t'ink erbout it and let yer know."

"All right."

Bowery Billy did think a great deal about what Myrick had said to him.

But events were to transpire so rapidly for him for some time during the immediate future that he had little time for improvement.

And those who have known Bowery Billy as he has been, and who have liked him so, need not fear that anything they have fancied about him will have disappeared when they meet him again in another story.

Brigitti, the little Jewess, Billy saw now and then for some time, and they remained the warmest friends.

He would never forget that she had saved him from a terrible death at the hands of Skyrowski, the firebug.

And, among a better class of her own people, her lot was not likely to be a hard one, for she was later adopted by a wealthy Jew, and given a chance to be a lady.

The negro who had acted as a spy upon Billy, whom the Bowery lad had treated with such contempt, was caught about a month after these events and convicted of being an accomplice of the firebugs.

Of Dan, the bully, nothing more need be said here. He was bound to make his own career in his own way.

Naturally, he was to be more or less connected with the fortunes of Bowery Billy.

THE END.

Adventures came thick and fast in the life of the wide-awake street Arab, who seemed fated to rub up against many of the strange things that take place in the great metropolis, New York, and you will agree with us that some of the most remarkable happenings in his whole career are set down in the next issue of the BOWERY BOY LIBRARY, entitled "Bowery Billy's Bootblack Pard; or, Righting a Great Wrong." Ready next week on all news stands.

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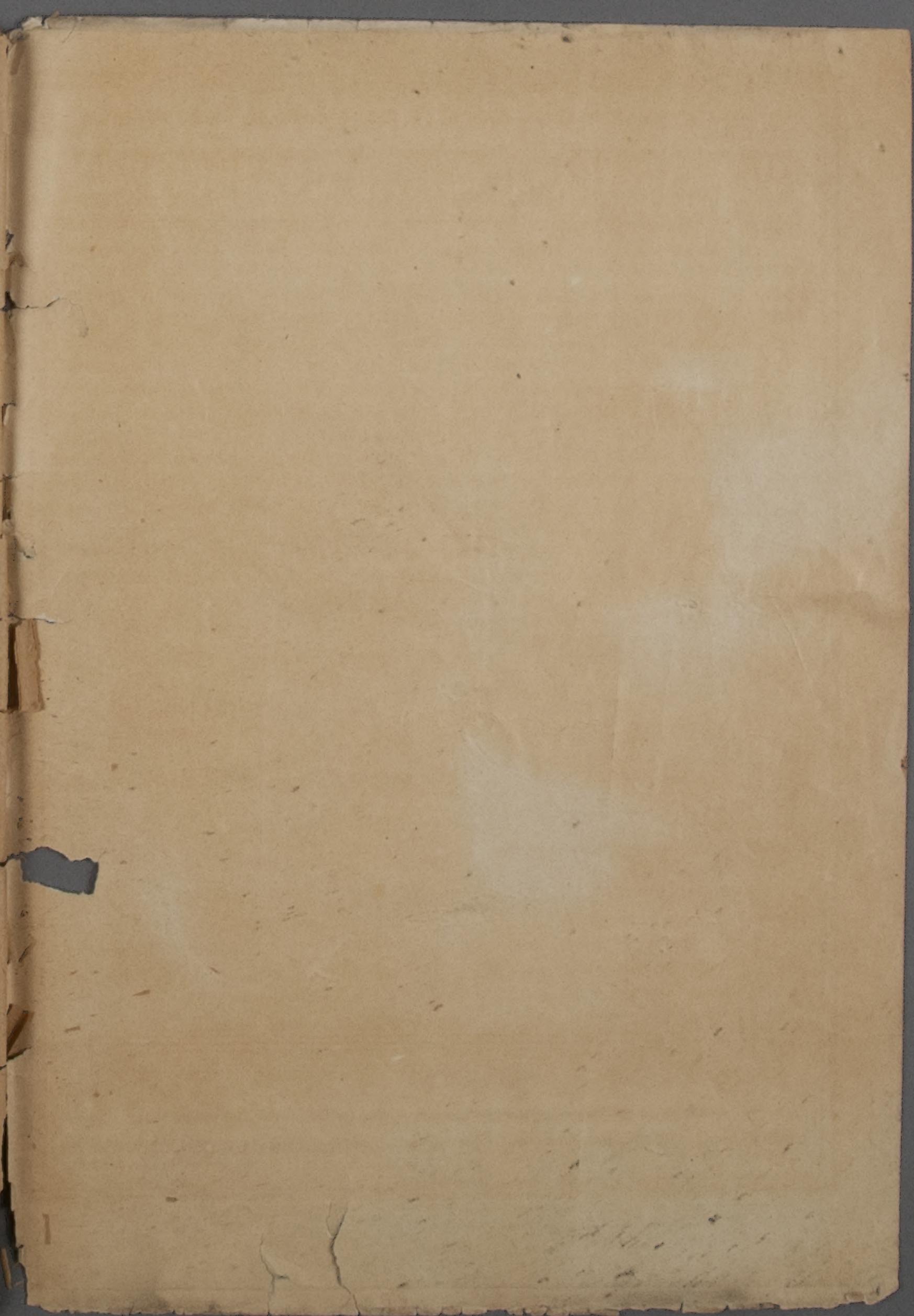
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